ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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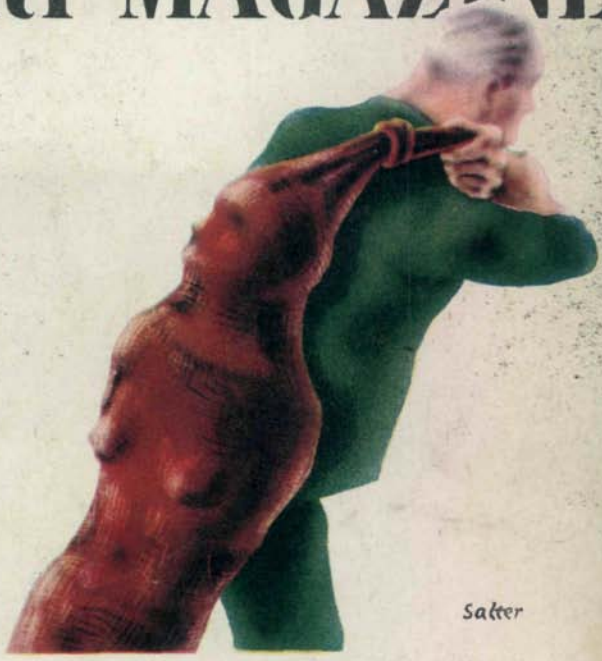

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Number 46

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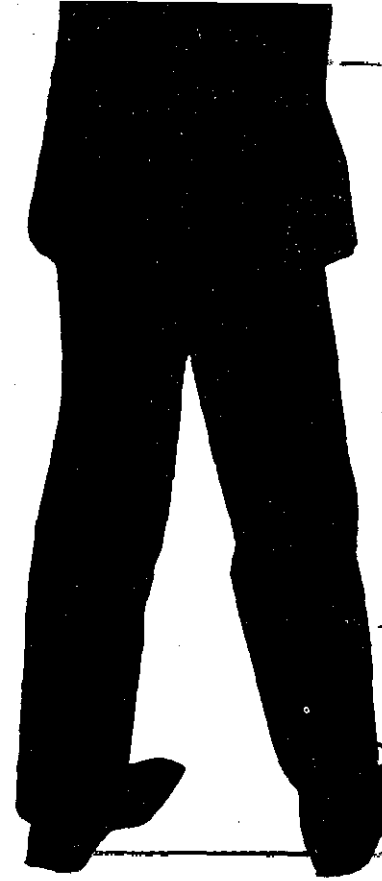

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2. Stories should not exceed 10,000 words.

3. Awards will be made solely on the basis of merit — that is, quality of writing and originality of plot. The contest is open to everyone except employees of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, The American Mercury, Inc., and their families. Stories are solicited from amateur as well as professional writers; from beginners as well as old-timers. All will have an equal chance to win the prizes.

4. Three judges will make the final decision in the Contest: Christopher Morley, noted author, critic, and connoisseur, and member of the Editorial Board of the Book-of-the-Month Club; Howard Haycraft, author of "Murder for Pleasure," the most authoritative history of the detective story; and Ellery Queen.

5. All entries must be received at the office of the magazine, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y., not later than October 20, 1947.

6. Prize winners will be announced and the prizes awarded by Christmas, 1947.

7. All prize winners and all other contestants whose stories are purchased agree to grant Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine first book-anthology rights, and when these rights are exercised, they will be paid for as follows: $50 for the original edition, $50 for cheap editions, and a pro rata share of 25% of the royalties if the anthology should be chosen by a book club. Authors of all stories bought through this contest agree to sell non-exclusive foreign rights for $50 per story.

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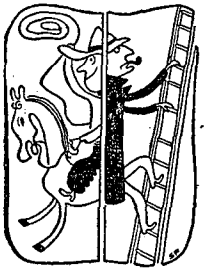

For our 1945 anthology, ROGUES' GALLERY, *we had great difficulty finding a short story by Dashiell Hammett in which the protagonist literally got away with murder. Eventually we used "Ruffian's Wife," the tale of a swashbuckling killer who liquidated an even more disagreeable character — in the true Hammett tradition, with his bare hands — and all to satisfy a woman's vanity (which, in a sense, is also in the purest Hammett tradition). This story of callous brutality appeared originally in the October 1925 issue of a San Francisco periodical called "Sunset Magazine." Among the many reviews of* ROGUES' GALLERY *was a long double-column written by Joseph Henry Jackson, editor of the Books section of the "San Francisco Chronicle." Mr. Jackson, compiler of the Viking Portable* MURDER BOOK *and one of the most perceptive and respected critics in America, related an anecdote about "Ruffian's Wife" which throws an interesting historical sidelight on Hammett's early work — its shocking qualities, its influence on those sensitive to literary power, and most important, its remarkable toughness in resisting the test of time. Mr. Jackson wrote:*

"One story that stands out far beyond the rest is an old acquaintance of my own — a story by Dashiell Hammett which we ran in the old 'Sunset Magazine' when I was a very sub sub-editor there twenty years ago. It's the lead-off story in the volume and Hammett fans owe Mr. Queen a debt for digging it out of the files . . . I own to a special affection for it because there was a schism in the office in respect of the story when it was read and I had the pleasure of casting the deciding affirmative vote. It did startle some of our gentler readers: several wrote in to say that they hadn't expected this kind of thing about rough characters in a magazine which came into their homes. But I'm very happy to see how well the story stands up now, twenty years later."

"Ruffian's Wife" has become so familiar in the last two years, since its appearance in ROGUES' GALLERY, *that we do not feel justified in reprinting it in EQMM. As you know, our reprint policy is to bring you only the relatively unknown classics, the buried treasures, of the great crime writers. So, we dug even deeper in the Hammett files — to discover another "forgotten" story by the creator of Sam Spade, the Thin Man, the Fat Man, and the Continental Op.*

Well, we found it. Here is another early Hammett, published one month

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ahead of "Ruffian's Wife." Judge for yourself how well "Corkscrew" stands up after twenty-two years of fast and furious whoduniting . . .

"Corkscrew" is a Continental Op story of the period when the Op, to quote the Milk River hombre, was "the toughest, hardest, strongest, fastest, sharpest, biggest, wisest and meanest man west of the Mississippi River" — which is saying a mouthful, even for the Op. "Corkscrew" is also sure-fire: it combines the two most popular forms of entertainment fiction — the detective story and the western, both American to the core. Yes, the Hammett gun is double-barreled, the Hammett knife is double-edged . . .

CORKSCREW

by DASHIELL HAMMETT

BOILING like a coffee pot before we were five miles out of Filmer, the automobile stage carried me south into the shimmering heat and bitter white dust of the Arizona desert.

I was the only passenger. The driver felt as little like talking as I. All morning we rode through cactus-spiked, sage-studded oven-country, without conversation, except when the driver cursed the necessity of stopping to feed his clattering machine more water. The car crept through soft sifting sand; wound between steep-walled red mesas; dipped into dry arroyas where clumps of dusty mesquite were like white lace in the glare; and skirted sharp-edged barrancos.

The sun climbed up in the brazen sky. The higher it got, the larger and hotter it got. I wondered how much hotter it would have to get to explode the cartridges in the gun under my arm. Not that it mattered — if it got any hotter, we would all blow up anyway. Car, desert, chauffeur and I would all bang out of existence in one explosive flash. I didn't care if we did!

That was my frame of mind as we pushed up a long slope, topped a sharp ridge, and slid down into Corkscrew.

Corkscrew wouldn't have been impressive at any time. It especially wasn't this white-hot Sunday afternoon. One sandy street following the crooked edge of the Tirabuzon Cañon, from which, by translation, the town took its name. A town, it was called, but village would have been flattery: fifteen or eighteen shabby buildings slumped along the irregular street, with tumble-down shacks leaning against them, squatting close to them, and trying to sneak away from them.

In the street, four dusty automobiles cooked. Between two buildings I could see a corral where half a dozen horses bunched their dejection under

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a shed. No person was in sight. Even the stage driver, carrying a limp and apparently empty mail sack, had vanished into a building labelled "Adderly's Emporium."

Gathering up my two grey-powdered bags, I climbed out and crossed the road to where a weather-washed sign, on which Cañon House was barely visible, hung over the door of a two-story, iron-roofed, adobe house.

I crossed the wide, unpainted and unpeopled porch, and pushed a door open with my foot, going into a dining-room, where a dozen men and a woman sat eating at oilcloth-covered tables. In one corner of the room, was a cashier's desk; and, on the wall behind it, a keyrack. Between rack and desk, a pudgy man whose few remaining hairs were the exact shade of his sallow skin, sat on a stool, and pretended he didn't see me.

"A room and a lot of water," I said, dropping my bags.

"You can have your room," the sallow man growled, "but water won't do you no good. You won't no sooner drink and wash, than you'll be thirsty and dirty all over again. Where in hell is that register?"

He couldn't find it, so he pushed an old envelope across the desk at me.

"Register on the back of that. Be with us a spell?"

"Most likely."

A chair upset behind me.

I turned around as a lanky man with enormous red ears reared himself upright with the help of his hands on the table.

"Ladiesh an' gentsh," he solemnly declaimed, "th' time hash came for yuh t' give up y'r evil waysh an' git out y'r knittin'. Th' law hash came to Orilla County!"

The drunk bowed to me, upset his ham and eggs, and sat down again. The other diners applauded with thump of knives and forks on tables.

I looked them over while they looked me over. A miscellaneous assortment: weather-beaten horsemen, clumsily muscled laborers, men with the pasty complexions of night workers. The one woman in the room didn't belong to Arizona. She was a thin girl of maybe twenty-five, with too-bright dark eyes, dark, short hair, and a sharp prettiness that was the mark of a larger settlement than this. You've seen her, or her sisters, in the larger cities, in the places that get going after the theatres let out.

The man with her was range country — a slim lad in the early twenties, not very tall, with pale blue eyes that were startling in so dark-tanned a face. His features were a bit too perfect in their clean-cut regularity.

"So you're the new deputy sheriff?" the sallow man questioned the back of my head.

Somebody had kept my secret right out in the open!

"Yes." I hid my annoyance under a grin that took in him and the diners. "But I'll trade my star right now for that room and water we were talking about."

He took me through the dining-room and upstairs to a board-walled

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room in the rear second floor, said, "This is it," and left me.

I did what I could with the water in a pitcher on the washstand to free myself from the white grime I had accumulated. Then I dug a grey shirt and a suit of whipcords out of my bags, and holstered my gun under my left shoulder, where it wouldn't be a secret.

In each side pocket of my coat I stowed a new .32 automatic — small, snub-nosed affairs that weren't much better than toys. Their smallness let me carry them where they'd be close to my hands without advertising the fact that the gun under my shoulder wasn't all my arsenal.

The dining-room was empty when I went downstairs again. The sallow pessimist who ran the place stuck his head out of a door.

"Any chance of getting something to eat?" I asked.

"Hardly any," jerking his head toward a sign that said:

"Meals 6 to 8 A. M., 12 to 2 and 5 to 7 P. M."

"You can grub up at the Toad's — if you ain't particular," he added sourly.

I went out, across the porch that was too hot for idlers, and into the street that was empty for the same reason. Huddled against the wall of a large one-story adobe building, which had Border Palace painted all across its front, I found the Toad's.

It was a small shack — three wooden walls stuck against the adobe wall of the Border Palace — jammed with a lunch counter, eight stools, a stove, a handful of cooking implements, half the flies in the world, an iron cot behind a half-drawn burlap curtain, and the proprietor. The interior had once been painted white. It was a smoky grease-color now, except where home-made signs said:

"Meals At All Hours. No Credit"

and gave the prices of various foods. These signs were a fly-specked yellow-grey.

The proprietor was a small man, old, scrawny, dark-skinned, wrinkled and cheerful.

"You the new sheriff?" he asked, and when he grinned I saw he had no teeth.

"Deputy," I admitted, "and hungry. I'll eat anything you've got that won't bite back, and that won't take long to get ready."

"Sure!" He turned to his stove and began banging pans around. "We need sheriffs," he said over his shoulder.

"Somebody been picking on you?"

"Nobody pick on me — I tell you that!" He flourished a stringy hand at a sugar barrel under the shelves behind his counter. "I fix them decidedly!"

A shotgun butt stuck out of the barrel. I pulled it out: a double-barrel shotgun with the barrels sawed off short: a mean weapon close up.

I slid it back into its resting place as the old man began thumping dishes down in front of me.

The food inside me and a cigarette

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burning, I went out into the crooked street again. From the Border Palace came the clicking of pool balls. I followed the sound through the door.

In a large room, four men were leaning over a couple of pool tables, while five or six more watched them from chairs along the wall. On one side of the room was an oak bar. Through an open door in the rear came the sound of shuffling cards.

A big man whose paunch was dressed in a white vest, over a shirt in the bosom of which a diamond sparkled, came toward me; his triple-chinned red face expanding into a professionally jovial smile.

"I'm Bardell," he greeted me, stretching out a fat and shiny-nailed hand on which more diamonds glittered. "This is my joint. I'm glad to know you, sheriff! By God, we need you, and I hope you can spend a lot of your time here. These waddies" — and he chuckled, nodding at the pool players — "cut up rough on me sometimes."

I let him pump my hand up and down.

"Let me make you known to the boys," he went on, turning with one arm across my shoulders. "These are Circle H. A. R. riders" — waving some of his rings at the pool players — "except this Milk River hombre, who, being a peeler, kind of looks down on ordinary hands."

The Milk River hombre was the slender youth who had sat beside the girl in the Cañon House dining-room. His companions were young — though not quite so young as he — sun-marked, wind-marked, pigeontoed in high-heeled boots. Buck Small was sandy and pop-eyed; Smith was sandy and short; Dunne a rangy Irishman.

The men watching the game were mostly laborers from the Orilla Colony, or hands from some of the smaller ranches in the neighborhood. There were two exceptions: Chick Orr, short, thick-bodied, heavy-armed, with the shapeless nose, battered ears, gold front teeth and gnarled hands of a pugilist; and Gyp Rainey, a slack-chinned, ratty individual whose whole front spelled cocaine.

Conducted by Bardell, I went into the back room to meet the poker players. There were only four of them. The other card tables, the keno outfit, and the dice table were idle.

One of the players was the big-eared drunk who had made the welcoming speech at the hotel. Slim Vogel was the name. He was a Circle H. A. R. hand, as was Red Wheelan, who sat beside him. Both of them were full of hooch. The third player was a quiet, middle-aged man named Keefe. Number four was Mark Nisbet, a pale, slim man. Gambler was written all over him, from his heavy-lidded brown eyes to the slender sureness of his white fingers.

Nisbet and Vogel didn't seem to be getting along so good.

It was Nisbet's deal, and the pot had already been opened. Vogel, who had twice as many chips as anybody else, threw away two cards.

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"I want both of 'em off'n th' top — this time!" and he didn't say it nicely.

Nisbet dealt the cards, with nothing in his appearance to show he had heard the crack. Red Wheelan took three cards. Keefe was out. Nisbet drew one. Wheelan bet. Nisbet stayed. Vogel raised. Wheelan stayed. Nisbet raised. Vogel bumped it again. Wheelan dropped out. Nisbet raised once more.

"I'm bettin' you took *your* draw off'n th' top, too," Vogel snarled across the table at Nisbet, and tilted the pot again.

Nisbet called. He had aces over kings. The cowpuncher three nines.

Vogel laughed noisily as he raked in the chips.

" 'F I could keep a sheriff behind you t' watch you all th' time, I'd do somethin' for myself!"

Nisbet pretended to be busy straightening his chips. I sympathized with him. He had played his hand rotten — but how else can you play against a drunk?

"How d'you like our little town?" Red Wheelan asked me.

"I haven't seen much of it yet," I stalled. "The hotel, the lunch-counter — they're all I've seen."

Wheelan laughed.

"So you met the Toad? That's Slim's friend!"

Everybody except Nisbet laughed, including Slim Vogel.

"Slim tried to beat the Toad out of two bits' worth of Java and sinkers once. He says he forgot to pay for 'em, but it's more likely he sneaked out. Anyways, the next day, here comes the Toad, stirring dust into the ranch, a shotgun under his arm. He'd lugged that instrument of destruction fifteen miles across the desert, on foot, to collect his two bits. He collected, too! He took his little two bits away from Slim right there between the corral and the bunkhouse — at the cannon's mouth, as you might say!"

Slim Vogel grinned ruefully and scratched one of his big ears.

"The old son-of-a-gun done came after me just like I was a damned thief! 'F he'd of been a man I'd of seen him in hell 'fore I'd of gave it to him. But what can y' do with an old buzzard that ain't even got no teeth to bite you with?"

His bleary eyes went back to the table, and the laugh on his loose lips changed to a sneer.

"Let's play," he growled, glaring at Nisbet. "It's a honest man's deal this time!"

Bardell and I went back to the front of the building, where the cowboys were still knocking the balls around. I sat in one of the chairs against the wall, and let them talk around me. The conversation wasn't exactly fluent. Anybody could tell there was a stranger present.

My first job was to get over that.

"Got any idea," I asked nobody in particular, "where I could pick up a horse? One that isn't too tricky for a bum rider to sit."

"You might get one at Echlin's stable," Milk River said slowly, meeting my gaze with guileless blue eyes;

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"though it ain't likely he's got anything that'll live long if you hurry it. I tell you what — Peery, out to the ranch, has got a buckskin that'd just fit you. He won't want to let him go, but if you took some real money along and flapped it in his face, maybe you could deal."

"You're not steering me into a horse I can't handle, are you?" I asked.

The pale eyes went blank.

"I ain't steering you into nothing whatsomever, Mister," he said. "You asked for information. I give it to you. But I don't mind telling you that anybody that can stay in a rocking chair can sit that buckskin."

"That's fine. I'll go out tomorrow." Milk River put his cue down, frowning.

"Come to think of it, Peery's going down to the lower camp tomorrow. I tell you — if you got nothing else to do, we'll mosey out there right now."

"Good," I said, and stood up.

"You boys going home?" Milk River asked his companions.

"Yeah," Smith spoke casually. "We gotta roll out early in the mornin', so I s'pose we'd ought to be shakin' along out there. I'll see if Slim an' Red are ready."

They weren't. Vogel's disagreeable voice came through the open door.

"I'm camped right here! I got this reptile on th' run, an' it's only a matter o' time 'fore he'll have t' take a chance on pullin' em off'n th' bottom t' save his hide. An' that's exac'ly what I'm awaitin' for! Th' first time he gets fancy, I'm goin' t' open up his Adam's apple for him!"

Smith returned to us.

"Slim an' Red are gonna play 'em a while. They'll git a lift out when they git enough."

Milk River, Smith, Dunne, Small and I went out of the Border Palace.

Three steps from the door, a stooped, white-mustached man in a collarless stiff-bosomed shirt swooped down on me.

"My name's Adderly," he introduced himself, holding out one hand toward me while flicking the other at Adderly's Emporium. "Got a minute to spare? I'd like to make you acquainted with some of the folks."

The Circle H. A. R. men were walking slowly toward one of the machines in the street.

"Can you wait a couple of minutes?" I called after them.

Milk River looked back.

"Yes. We got to gas and water the flivver. Take yor time."

Adderly led me toward his store, talking as he walked.

"Some of the better element is at my house — danged near all the better element. The folks who'll back you up if you'll put the fear of God in Corkscrew. We're tired and sick of this perpetual hell-raising."

We went through his store, across a yard, and into his house. There were a dozen or more people there.

The Reverend Dierks — a gangling, emaciated man with a tight mouth in a long, thin face — made a speech at me. He called me brother,

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he told me what a wicked place Corkscrew was, and he told me he and his friends were prepared to swear out warrants for the arrest of various men who had committed sixty-some crimes during the past two years.

He had a list of them, with names, dates, and hours, which he read to me. Everybody I had met that day — except those here — was on that list at least once, along with a lot of names I didn't know. The crimes ranged from murder to intoxication and the use of profane language.

"If you'll let me have that list, I'll study it," I promised.

He gave it to me, but he wasn't to be put off with promises.

"To refrain even for an hour from punishing wickedness is to be a partner to that wickedness, brother. You have been inside that house of sin operated by Bardell. You have heard the Sabbath desecrated with the sound of poolballs. You have smelled the foul odor of illegal rum on men's breaths!

"Strike now, brother! Let it not be said that you condoned evil from your first day in Corkscrew! Go into those hells and do your duty as an officer of the law and a Christian!"

This was a minister; I didn't like to laugh.

I looked at the others. They were sitting — men and women — on the edges of their chairs. On their faces were the same expressions you see around a prize ring just before the gong rings.

Mrs. Echlin, the livery man's wife, an angular-faced, angular-bodied woman, caught my gaze with her pebble-hard eyes.

"And that brazen scarlet woman who calls herself Señora Gaia — and the three hussies who pretend they're her daughters! You ain't much of a deputy sheriff if you leave 'em in that house of theirs one night longer — to poison the manhood of Orilla County"!

The others nodded vigorously.

Miss Janey, school teacher, false-toothed, sour-faced, put in her part:

"And even worse than those — those creatures, is that Clio Landes! Worse, because at least those — those hussies" — she looked down, managed a blush, looked out of the corners of her eyes at the minister — "those hussies are at least openly what they are. While she — who knows how bad she really is?"

"I don't know about her," Adderly began, but his wife shut him up.

"I do!" she snapped. She was a large, mustached woman whose corsets made knobs and points in her shiny black dress. "Miss Janey is perfectly right."

"Is this Clio Landes person on your list?" I asked, not remembering it.

"No, brother, she is not," the Reverend Dierks said regretfully. "But only because she is more subtle than the others. Corkscrew would indeed be better without her — a woman of obviously low moral standards, with no visible means of support, associating with our worst element."

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"I'm glad to have met you folks," I said as I folded the list and put it in my pocket. "And I'm glad to know you'll back me up."

I edged toward the door, hoping to get away without much more talk. Not a chance. The Reverend Dierks followed me up.

"You will strike now, brother? You will carry God's war immediately into brothel and gambling hell?"

"I'm glad to have your support," I said, "but there isn't going to be any wholesale raiding — not for a while, anyway.

"This list you've given me — I'll do what I think ought to be done after I've examined it, but I'm not going to worry a lot over a batch of petty misdemeanors that happened a year ago. I'm starting from scratch. What happens from now on is what interests me. See you later."

And I left.

The cowboys' car was standing in front of the store when I came out.

"I've been meeting the better element," I explained as I found a place between Milk River and Buck Small.

Milk River's brown face wrinkled around his eyes.

"Then you know what kind of riff-raff we are," he said.

Dunne driving, the car carried us out of Corkscrew at the street's southern end, and then west along the sandy and rocky bottom of a shallow draw. The sand was deep and the rocks were numerous; we didn't make very good time. An hour and a half of jolting, sweltering and smothering in this draw, and we climbed up out of it and crossed to a larger and greener draw.

Around a bend in this draw the Circle H. A. R. buildings sat. We got out of the automobile under a low shed, where another car already stood. A heavily muscled, heavily boned man came around a white-washed building toward us. His face was square and dark. His close-clipped mustache and deep-set small eyes were dark.

This, I learned, was Peery, who bossed the ranch for the owner, who lived in the East.

"He wants a nice, mild horse," Milk River told Peery, "and we thought maybe you might sell him that Rollo horse of yours. That's the mildest horse I ever heard tell of."

Peery tilted his high-crowned sombrero back on his head and rocked on his heels.

"What was you figuring on paying for this here horse?"

"If it suits me," I said, "I'm willing to pay what it takes to buy him."

"That ain't so bad," he said. "S'pose one of you boys dab a rope on that buckskin and bring him around for the gent to look at."

Smith and Dunne set out together, pretending they weren't going eagerly.

Presently the two cowhands came back, riding, with the buckskin between them, already saddled and bridled. I noticed each of them had a rope on him. He was a loose-jointed pony of an unripe lemon color, with a sad, drooping, Roman-nosed head.

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"There he is," Peery said. "Try him out and we'll talk dinero."

I chucked away my cigarette and went over to the buckskin. He cocked one mournful eye at me, twitched one ear, and went on looking sadly at the ground. Dunne and Smith took their lines off him, and I got into the saddle.

Rollo stood still under me until the other horses had left his side.

Then he showed me what he had.

He went straight up in the air — and hung there long enough to turn around before he came down. He stood on his front feet and then on his hind ones, and then he got off all of them again.

I didn't like this, but it wasn't a surprise. I had known I was a lamb being led to the slaughter. This was the third time it had happened to me. I might as well get it over with. A city man in range country is bound to find himself sitting on a disagreeable bone sooner or later. I'm a city man but I can even ride a horse if he'll coöperate. But when the horse doesn't want to stay under me — the horse wins.

Rollo was going to win. I wasn't foolish enough to waste strength fighting him.

So the next time he traded ends, I went away from him, holding myself limp, so the tumble wouldn't ruin me.

Smith had caught the yellow pony, and was holding its head, when I took my knees off my forehead and stood up.

Peery, squatting on his heels, was frowning at me. Milk River was looking at Rollo with what was supposed to be a look of utter amazement.

"Now whatever did you do to Rollo to make him act thataway?" Peery asked me.

"Maybe he was only fooling," I suggested. "I'll try him again."

Once more Rollo stood still and sad until I was securely up on him. Then he went into convulsions under me — until I piled on my neck and one shoulder in a clump of brush.

I stood up, rubbing my left shoulder, which had hit a rock. Smith was holding the buckskin. The faces of all five men were serious and solemn — too serious and solemn.

"Maybe he don't like you," Buck Small gave his opinion.

"Might be," I admitted as I climbed into the saddle for the third time.

The lemon-tinted devil was getting warmed up by now, was beginning to take pride in his work. He let me stay aboard longer than before, so he could slam me off harder.

I was sick when I hit the ground in front of Peery and Milk River. It took me a little while to get up, and I had to stand still for a moment, until I could feel the ground under my feet.

"Hold him a couple of seconds —" I began.

Peery's big frame stood in front of me.

"That's enough," he said. "I ain't going to have you killed."

"Get out of my way," I growled. "I like this. I want more of it."

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"You don't top my pony no more," he growled back at me. "He ain't used to playing so rough. You're liable to hurt him, falling off carelessly."

I tried to get past him. He barred my way with a thick arm. I drove my right fist at his dark face.

He went back, busy trying to keep his feet under him.

I went over and hoisted myself up on Rollo.

I had the buckskin's confidence by this time. We were old friends. He didn't mind showing me his secret stuff. He did things no horse could possibly do.

I landed in the same clump of brush that had got me once before and stayed where I landed.

I didn't know whether I could have got up again if I had wanted to. But I didn't want to. I closed my eyes and rested. If I hadn't done what I had set out to do, I was willing to fail.

Small, Dunne and Milk River carried me indoors and spread me on a bunk.

"I don't think that horse would be much good to me," I told them. "Maybe I'd better look at another."

"You don't want to get discouraged like that," Small advised me.

"You better lay still and rest, fella," Milk River said. "You're liable to fall apart if you start moving around."

I took his advice.

When I woke up it was morning, and Milk River was prodding me.

"You figuring on getting up for breakfast, or would you like it brung to you in bed?"

I moved cautiously until I found I was all in one piece.

"I can crawl that far."

He sat down on a bunk across the room and rolled a cigarette while I put on my shoes — the only things, except my hat, I hadn't slept in.

Presently he said:

"I always had the idea that nobody that couldn't sit a horse some couldn't amount to nothing much. I ain't so sure now. You can't ride any, and never will. You don't seem to have the least notion what to do after you get in the middle of the animal! But, still and all, a hombre that'll let a bronc dirty him up three times handrunning and then ties into a gent who tries to keep him from making it permanent, ain't exactly hay wire."

He lit his cigarette, and broke the match in half.

"I got a sorrel horse you can have for a hundred dollars. He don't take no interest in handling cows, but he's all horse, and he ain't mean."

I went into my money-belt — slid five twenties over into his lap.

"Better look at him first," he objected.

"You've seen him," I yawned, standing up. "Where's breakfast?"

Six men were eating in the chuckshack when we came in. Three of them were hands I hadn't seen before. Neither Peery, Wheelan, nor Vogel was there. Milk River introduced me to the strangers as the high-diving deputy sheriff, and, between bites of the food the one-eyed Chinese cook

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put on the table, the meal was devoted almost exclusively to wise cracks about my riding ability.

That suited me. I was sore and stiff, but my bruises weren't wasted. I had bought myself a place of some sort in this desert community, and maybe even a friend or two.

We were following the smoke of our cigarettes outdoors when running hoofs brought a swirl of dust up the draw.

Red Wheelan slid off his horse and staggered out of the sand-cloud.

"Slim's dead!" he said thickly.

Half a dozen voices shot questions at him. He stood swaying, trying to answer them. He was drunk as a lord!

"Nisbet shot him. I heard about it when I woke up this mornin'. He was shot early this mornin' — in front of Bardell's. I left 'em aroun' midnight last night, an' went down to Gaia's. I heard about it this mornin'. I went after Nisbet, but" — he looked down sheepishly at his empty belt — "Bardell took m' gun away."

He swayed again. I caught him, steadying him.

"Horses!" Peery bawled over my shoulder. "We're going to town!"

I let go of Wheelan and turned around.

"We're going to town," I repeated. "but no foolishness when we get there. This is my job."

Peery's eyes met mine.

"Slim belonged to us," he said.

"And whoever killed Slim belongs to me," I said.

That was all on the subject, but I didn't think I had made the point stick.

An hour later we were dismounting in front of the Border Palace.

A long, thin, blanket-wrapped body lay on two tables that had been pushed together. Half the citizens of Corkscrew were there. Behind the bar, Chick Orr's battered face showed, hard and watchful. Gyp Rainey was sitting in a corner, rolling a cigarette with shaky fingers that sprinkled the floor with tobacco crumbs. Beside him, paying no attention to anything, Mark Nisbet sat.

"By God, I'm glad to see you!" Bardell was telling me, his fat face not quite so red as it had been the day before. "This thing of having men killed at my front door has got to stop, and you're the man to stop it!"

I lifted a flap of the blanket and looked at the dead man. A small hole was in his forehead, over his right eye.

"Has a doctor seen him?" I asked.

"Yes," Bardell said. "Doc Haley saw him, but couldn't do anything. He must have been dead before he fell."

"Can you send for Haley?"

"I reckon I can." Bardell called to Gyp Rainey, "Run across the street and tell Doc Haley that the deputy sheriff wants to talk to him."

Gyp went gingerly through the cowboys grouped at the door and vanished.

"What do you know about the killing, Bardell?" I began.

"Nothing," he said emphatically,

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and then went on to tell me what he knew. "Nisbet and I were in the back room, counting the day's receipts. Chick was straightening the bar up. Nobody else was in here. It was about half-past one this morning, maybe.

"We heard the shot — right out front, and all run out there, of course. Chick was closest, so he got there first. Slim was laying in the street — dead."

"And what happened after that?"

"Nothing. We brought him in here. Adderly and Doc Haley — who lives right across the street — and the Toad next door had heard the shot, too, and they came out and — and that's all there was to it."

I turned to Gyp.

"Bardell's give it all to you."

"Don't know who shot him?"

"Nope."

I saw Adderly's white mustache near the front of the room, and I put him on the stand next. He couldn't contribute anything. He had heard the shot, had jumped out of bed, put on pants and shoes, and had arrived in time to see Chick kneeling beside the dead man. He hadn't seen anything Bardell hadn't mentioned.

Dr. Haley had not arrived by the time I was through with Adderly, and I wasn't ready to open on Nisbet yet. Nobody else there seemed to know anything.

"Be back in a minute," I said, and went through the cowboys at the door to the street.

The Toad was giving his joint a much-needed cleaning.

"Good work," I praised him. "It needed it."

He climbed down from the counter on which he had been standing to reach the ceiling. The walls and floor were already comparatively clean.

"I not think it was so dirty," he grinned, showing his empty gums, "but when the sheriff come in to eat and make faces at my place, what am I going to do but clean him up?"

"Know anything about the killing?"

"Sure, I know. I am in my bed, and I hear that shot. I jump out of my bed, grab that shotgun, and run to the door. There is that Slim Vogel in the street, and that Chick Orr on his knees alongside him. I stick my head out. There is Mr. Bardell and that Nisbet standing in their door.

"Mr. Bardell say, 'How is he?'

"That Chick Orr, 'he say, He's dead enough.'

"That Nisbet, he does not say anything, but he turn around and go back into the place. And then comes the doctor and Mr. Adderly, and I go out, and after the doctor looks at him and says he is dead, we carry him into Mr. Bardell's place."

That was all the Toad knew. I returned to the Border Palace. Dr. Haley — a fussy little man was there.

The sound of the shot had awakened him, he said, but he had seen nothing beyond what the others had already told me. The bullet was a .38. Death had been instantaneous.

So much for that.

I sat on a corner of a pool table, facing Nisbet. Feet shuffled on the

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floor behind me and I could feel tension.

"What can you tell me, Nisbet?" I asked.

"Nothing that is likely to help," he said, picking his words slowly and carefully. "You were in in the afternoon and saw Slim, Wheelan, Keefe and I playing. Well, the game went on like that. He won a lot of money — or he seemed to think it was a lot — as long as we played poker. But Keefe left before midnight, and Wheelan shortly after. Nobody else came in the game, so we were kind of short-handed for poker. We quit and played some high-card. I cleaned Vogel — got his last nickel. It was about one o'clock when he left, say, half an hour before he was shot."

"You and Vogel get along pretty well?"

The gambler's eyes switched up to mine, turned to the floor again.

"You know better than that. You heard him riding me ragged. Well, he kept that up — maybe was a little rawer toward the last."

"And you let him ride?"

"I did just that. I make my living out of cards, not out of fights."

"There was no trouble over the table, then?"

"I didn't say that. There was trouble. He made a break for his gun after I cleaned him."

"And you?"

"I shaded him on the draw — took his gun — unloaded it — gave it back to him — told him to beat it."

"And you didn't see him again until after he had been killed?"

"That's right."

I walked over to Nisbet, holding out one hand.

"Let me look at your gun."

He slid it swiftly out of his clothes — butt-first — into my hand. A .38 S. & W., loaded in all six chambers.

"Don't lose it," I said as I handed it back to him, "I may want it later."

A roar from Peery turned me around. As I turned I let my hands go into my coat pockets to rest on the .32 toys.

Peery's right hand was near his neck, within striking distance of the gun I knew he had under his vest. Spread out behind him, his men were as ready for action as he.

"Maybe that's a deputy sheriff's idea of what had ought to be done," Perry was bellowing, "but it ain't mine! That skunk killed Slim. Slim went out of here toting too much money. That skunk shot him down without even giving him a chance to go for his iron, and took his dirty money back. If you think we're going to stand for — "

"Maybe somebody's got some evidence I haven't heard," I cut in. "The way it stands, I haven't got enough to convict Nisbet."

"Evidence be damned! Facts are facts, and you know this — "

"The first fact for you to study," I interrupted him again, "is that I'm running this show — running it my own way. Got anything against that?"

"Plenty!"

A worn .45 appeared in his fist.

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Guns blossomed in the hands of all the men behind him.

I got between Peery's gun and Nisbet, feeling ashamed of the little popping noise my .32s were going to make compared with the roar of the guns facing me.

"What I'd like" — Milk River had stepped away from his fellows, and was leaning his elbows on the bar, facing them, a gun in each hand, a purring quality in his drawling voice — "would be for whosoever wants to swap lead with our high-diving deputy to wait his turn. One at a time is my idea. I don't like this idea of crowding him."

Peery's face went purple.

"What I don't like," he bellowed at the boy, "is a yellow puppy that'll throw down the men he rides with!"

Milk River's dark face flushed, but his voice was still a purring drawl.

"Mister jigger, what you don't like and what you do like are so damned similar to me that I can't tell 'em apart. And you don't want to forget that I ain't one of your rannies. I got a contract to gentle some horses for you at ten dollars per gentle. Outside of that, you and yours are strangers to me."

The excitement was over. The action that had been brewing had been talked to death by now.

"Your contract expired just about a minute and a half ago," Peery was telling Milk River. "You can show up at the Circle H. A. R. just once more — that's when you come for whatever stuff you left behind you. You're through!"

He pushed his square-jawed face at me.

"And you needn't think all the bets are in!"

He spun on his heel, and his hands trailed him out to their horses.

Milk River and I were sitting in my room at the Cañon House an hour later, talking. I had sent word to the county seat that the coroner had a job down here, and had found a place to stow Vogel's body until he came.

"Can you tell me who spread the grand news that I was a deputy sheriff?" I asked Milk River. "It was supposed to be a secret."

"Was it? Nobody would of thought it. Our Mr. Turney didn't do nothing else for two days but run around telling folks what was going to happen when the new deputy come."

"Who is this Turney?"

"He's the gent that bosses the Orilla County Company outfit."

So my client's local manager was the boy who had tipped my mitt!

"Got anything special to do the next few days?" I asked.

"Nothing downright special."

"I've got a place on the payroll for a man who knows this country and can chaperon me around it."

"I'd have to know what the play was before I'd set in," he said slowly. "You ain't a regular deputy, and you don't belong in this country. It ain't none of my business, but I wouldn't want to tie in with a blind game."

That was sensible enough.

"I'll spread it out for you," I offered

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"I'm a private detective — the San Francisco branch of the Continental Detective Agency. The stockholders of the Orilla Colony Company sent me down here. They've spent a lot of money irrigating and developing their land, and now they're ready to sell it.

"According to them, the combination of heat and water makes it ideal farm land — as good as the Imperial Valley. Nevertheless, there doesn't seem to be any great rush of customers. What's the matter, so the stockholders figure, is that you original inhabitants of this end of the state are such a hard lot that peaceful farmers don't want to come among you.

"It's no secret from anybody that both borders of this United States are sprinkled with sections that are as lawless now as they ever were in the old days. There's too much money in running immigrants over the line, and it's too easy, not to have attracted a lot of gentlemen who don't care how they get their money. With only 450 immigration inspectors divided between the two borders, the government hasn't been able to do much. The official guess is that some 135,000 foreigners were run into the country last year through back and side doors.

"Because this end of Orilla County isn't railroaded or telephoned up, it has got to be one of the chief smuggling sections, and therefore, according to these men who hired me, full of assorted thugs. On another job a couple of months ago, I happened to run into a smuggling game, and knocked it over. The Orilla Colony people thought I could do the same thing for them down here. So hither I come to make this part of Arizona lady-like.

"I stopped over at the county seat and got myself sworn in as deputy sheriff, in case the official standing came in handy. The sheriff said he didn't have a deputy down here and hadn't the money to hire one, so he was glad to sign me on. But we thought it was a secret."

"I think you're going to have one one hell of a lot of fun," Milk River grinned at me, "so I reckon I'll take that job you was offering. But I ain't going to be no deputy myself. I'll play around with you, but I don't want to tie myself up, so I'll have to enforce no laws I don't like."

"It's a bargain. Now what can you tell me that I ought to know?"

"Well, you needn't bother none about the Circle H. A. R. They're plenty tough, but they ain't running nothing over the line."

"That's all right as far as it goes," I agreed, "but my job is to clean out trouble-makers, and from what I've seen of them they come under that heading."

"You're going to have one hell of a lot of fun," Milk River repeated. "Of course they're troublesome! But how could Peery raise cows down here if he didn't get hisself a crew that's a match for the gunmen your Orilla Colony people don't like? And you know how cowhands are. Set 'em down in a hard neighborhood and they're hell-bent on proving to everybody that they're just as tough as the next one."

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"I've nothing against them — if they behave. Now about these border-running folks?"

"I reckon Bardell's your big meat. Next to him — Big 'Nacio. You ain't seen him yet? A big, black-whiskered Mex that's got a rancho down the cañon — four-five mile this side of the line. Anything that comes over the line comes through that rancho. But, proving that's another item for you to beat your head about."

"He and Bardell work together?"

"Uh-huh — I reckon he works for Bardell. Another thing you got to include in your tally is that these foreign gents who buy their way across the line don't always — nor even mostly — wind up where they want to. It ain't nothing unusual these days to find some bones out in the desert beside what was a grave until the coyotes opened it. And the buzzards are getting fat! If the immigrant's got anything worth taking on him, or if a couple of government men happen to be nosing around, or if anything happens to make the smuggling gents nervous, they usually drop their customer and dig him in where he falls."

The racket of the dinner-bell downstairs cut off our conference at this point.

There were only eight or ten diners in the dining-room. None of Peery's men was there. Milk River and I sat at a table back in one corner of the room. Our meal was about half eaten when the dark-eyed girl I had seen the previous day came in.

She came straight to our table. I stood up to learn her name was Clio Landes. She was the girl the better element wanted floated. She gave me a flashing smile, a strong, thin hand, and sat down.

"I hear you've lost your job again, you big bum," she laughed at Milk River.

I had known she didn't belong to Arizona. Her voice was New York.

"If that's all you heard, I'm still 'way ahead of you," Milk River grinned back at her. "I gone and got me another job — riding herd on law and order."

From the distance came the sound of a shot.

I went on eating.

Clio Landes said:

"Don't you coppers get excited over things like that?"

"The first rule," I told her, "is never to let anything interfere with your meals, if you can help it."

An overalled man came in from the street.

"Nisbet's been killed down in Bardell's!" he yelled.

To Bardell's Border Palace Milk River and I went, half the diners running ahead of us, with half the town.

We found Nisbet in the back room, stretched out on the floor, dead. A hole that a .45 could have made was in his chest, which the men around him had bared.

Bardell's fingers gripped my arm. "Never give him a chance, the

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dogs!" he cried. "Cold murder!"

"Who shot him?"

"One of the Circle H. A. R., you can bet your neck on that!"

"Didn't anybody see it?"

"Nobody here admits they saw it."

"How did it happen?"

"Mark was out front. Me and Chick and five or six of these men were there. Mark came back here. Just as he stepped through the door — bang!"

Bardell shook his fist at the open window.

I crossed to the window and looked out. A five-foot strip of rocky ground lay between the building and the sharp edge of the Tirabuzon Cañon. A close-twisted rope was tight around a small knob of rock at the cañon's edge.

I pointed at the rope. Bardell swore savagely.

"If I'd of seen that we'd of got him! We didn't think anybody could get down there, and didn't look very close. We ran up and down the ledge, looking between buildings."

We went outside, where I lay on my belly and looked down into the cañon. The rope — one end fastened to the knob — ran straight down the rock wall for twenty feet, and disappeared among the trees and bushes of a narrow shelf that ran along the wall there. Once on that shelf, a man could find ample cover to shield his retreat.

"What do you think?" I asked Milk River, who lay beside me.

"A clean getaway."

I stood up, pulling up the rope and handing it to Milk River.

"It don't mean nothing to me. Might be anybody's," he said.

"The ground tell you anything?"

He shook his head again.

"You go down into the cañon and see what you can pick up," I told him. "I'll ride out to the Circle H. A. R. If you don't find anything, ride out that way."

I went back indoors, for further questioning. Of the seven men who had been in Bardell's place at the time of the shooting, three seemed to be fairly trustworthy. The testimony of those three agreed with Bardell's in every detail.

"Didn't you say you were going out to see Peery?" Bardell asked.

"Yes."

"Chick, get horses! Me and you'll ride out there with the deputy, and as many of you other men as want to go. He'll need guns behind him!"

"Nothing doing!" I stopped Chick. "I'm going by myself. This posse stuff is out of my line."

Bardell scowled, but he nodded his head in agreement.

"You're running it," he said. "I'd like to go out there with you, but if you want to play it different, I'm gambling you're right."

In the livery stable, where we had put our horses, I found Milk River saddling them, and we rode out of town together.

Half a mile out, we split. He turned to the left, down a trail that led into the cañon, calling over his shoulder to me:

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"If you get through out there sooner than you think, you can maybe pick me up by following the draw the ranch-house is in down to the cañon. Don't be too hard on the boys!"

I turned into the draw that led toward the Circle H. A. R., the long-legged, long-bodied horse Milk River had sold me carrying me along easily and swiftly. It was too soon after midday for riding to be pleasant. Heat waves boiled out of the draw-bottom, the sun hurt my eyes, dust caked my throat.

Crossing from this draw into the larger one the Circle H. A. R. occupied, I found Peery waiting for me.

He didn't say anything, didn't move a hand. He just sat his horse and watched me approach. Two .45s were holstered on his legs.

I came alongside and held out the lariat I had taken from the rear of the Border Palace. As I held it out I noticed that no rope decorated his saddle.

"Know anything about this?" I asked.

He looked at the rope.

"Looks like one of those things hombres use to drag steers around with."

"Can't fool you, can I?" I grunted. "Ever see this particular one before?"

He took a minute or more to think up an answer to that.

"Yeah," finally. "Fact is, I lost that same rope somewheres between here and town this morning."

"Know where I found it?"

"Don't hardly make no difference." He reached for it. "The main thing is you found it."

"It might make a difference," I said, moving the rope out of his reach. "I found it strung down the cañon wall, behind Bardell's, where you could slide down it after you potted Nisbet."

His hands went to his guns. I turned so he could see the shape of one of the pocketed automatics I was holding.

"Don't do anything you'll be sorry for," I advised him.

"Shall I gun this la-ad now?" Dunne's brogue rolled from behind me, "or will we wa-ait a bit?"

I looked around to see him standing behind a boulder, a .30–30 rifle held on me. Above other rocks, other heads and other weapons showed.

I took my hand out of my pocket and put it on my saddle horn.

Peery spoke past me to the others.

"He tells me Nisbet's been shot."

"Now ain't that provokin'?" Buck Small grieved. "I hope it didn't hurt him none."

"Dead," I supplied.

"Whoever could 'a' done th' like o' that?" Dunne wanted to know.

"It wasn't Santa Claus," I gave my opinion.

"Got anything else to tell me?" Peery demanded.

"Isn't that enough?"

"Yeah. Now if I was you, I'd ride right back to Corkscrew."

"You mean you don't want to go back with me?"

"Not any. If you want to try and

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take me, now —"

I didn't want to try, and I said so.

"Then there's nothing keeping you here," he pointed out.

I grinned at him and his friends, pulled the sorrel around, and started back the way I had come.

A few miles down, I swung off to the south again, found the lower end of the Circle H. A. R. draw, and followed it down into the Tirabuzon Cañon. Then I started to work up toward the point where the rope had been let down.

The cañon deserved its name — a rough and stony, tree and bush-choked, winding gutter across the face of Arizona.

I hadn't gone far when I ran into Milk River, leading his horse toward me. He shook his head.

"Not a damned thing! I can cut sign with the rest of 'em, but there's too many rocky ridges here."

I dismounted. We sat under a tree and smoked some tobacco.

"How'd you come out?" he wanted to know.

"So-so. The rope is Peery's, but he didn't want to come along with me. I figure we can find him when we want him, so I didn't insist. It would have been kind of uncomfortable."

He looked at me out of the end of his pale eyes.

"A hombre might guess," he said slowly, "that you was playing the Circle H. A. R. against Bardell's crew, encouraging each side to eat up the other, and save you the trouble."

"You could be right. Do you think that'd be a dumb play?"

"I don't know. I reckon not — if you're making it, and if you're sure you're strong enough to take hold when you have to."

Night was coming on when Milk River and I turned into Corkscrew's crooked street. It was too late for the Cañon House's dining-room, so we got down in front of the Toad's shack.

Chick Orr was standing in the Border Palace doorway. He turned his hammered mug to call something over his shoulder. Bardell appeared beside him, looked at me with a question in his eyes, and the pair of them stepped out into the street.

"What result?" Bardell asked.

"No visible ones."

"You didn't make the pinch?" Chick Orr demanded, incredulously.

"That's right. I invited a man to ride back with me, but he said no."

The ex-pug looked me up and down and spit on the ground at my feet.

"Ain't you a swell mornin'-glory?" he snarled. "I got a great mind to smack you down!"

"Go ahead," I invited him. "I don't mind skinning a knuckle on you."

His little eyes brightened. Stepping in, he let an open hand go at my face. I took my face out of the way, and turned my back, taking off coat and shoulder-holster.

"Hold these, Milk River, while I take this pork-and-beaner for a romp."

Corkscrew came running as Chick

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and I faced each other. We were pretty much alike in size and age, but his fat was softer than mine, I thought. He had been a professional. I had battled around a little, but there was no doubt that he had me shaded on smartness. To offset that, his hands were lumpy and battered, while mine weren't. And he was — or had been — used to gloves, while bare knuckles were more in my line.

He crouched, waiting for me to come to him. I went, trying to play the boob, faking a right swing for a lead.

Not so good! He stepped outside instead of in. The left I chucked at him went wide. He rapped me on the cheek-bone.

I stopped trying to out-smart him and smacked both hands into his body, and felt happy when the flesh folded softly around them. He got away quicker than I could follow, and shook me up with a sock on the jaw.

He left-handed me some more — in the eye, in the nose. His right scraped my forehead, and I was in again.

Left, right, left, I dug into his middle. He slashed me across the face with forearm and fist, and got clear.

He fed me some more lefts, splitting my lip, spreading my nose, stinging my face from forehead to chin. And when I finally got past that left hand I walked into a right uppercut that came up from his ankle to click on my jaw with a shock that threw me back half a dozen steps.

Keeping after me, he swarmed all over me. The evening air was full of fists. I pushed my feet into the ground and stopped the hurricane with a couple of pokes just above where his shirt ran into his pants.

He copped me with his right again — but not so hard. I laughed at him, remembering that something had clicked in his hand when he landed that uppercut, and plowed into him, hammering at him with both hands.

He got away again — cut me up with his left. I smothered his left arm with my right, hung on to it, and whaled him with my own left, keeping them low. His right banged into me. I let it bang. It was dead.

He nailed me once more before the fight ended — with a high straight left that smoked as it came. I managed to keep my feet under me, and the rest of it wasn't so bad. He chopped me a lot more, but his steam was gone.

He went down after a while, from an accumulation of punches rather than from any especial one, and couldn't get up.

His face didn't have a mark on it that I was responsible for. Mine must have looked as if it had been run through a grinder.

"Maybe I ought to wash up before we eat," I said to Milk River as I took my coat and gun.

"Hell, yes!" he agreed, staring at my face.

A plump man in a Palm Beach suit got in front of me, taking my attention.

"I am Mr. Turney of the Orilla Colony Company," he introduced himself. "Am I to understand that

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you have not made an arrest since you have been here?"

This was the bird who had advertised me! I didn't like that, and I didn't like his round, aggressive face.

"Yes," I confessed.

"There have been two murders in two days," he ran on, "concerning which you have done nothing, though in each case the evidence seems clear enough. Do you think that is satisfactory?"

I didn't say anything.

"Let me tell you that it is not at all satisfactory," he supplied the answers to his own questions. "Neither is it satisfactory that you should have employed this man" — stabbing a plump finger in Milk River's direction — "who is notoriously one of the most lawless men in the county. I want you to understand clearly that unless there is a distinct improvement in your work — unless you show some disposition to do the things you were engaged to do — that engagement will be terminated!"

"Who'd you say you are?" I asked, when he had talked himself out.

"Mr. Turney, general superintendent of the Orilla Colony."

"So? Well, Mr. General Superintendent Turney, your owners forgot to tell me anything about you when they employed me. So I don't know you at all. Any time you've got anything to say to me, you turn it over to your owners, and if it's important enough, maybe they'll pass it on to me."

He puffed himself up.

"I shall certainly inform them that you have been extremely remiss in your duty, however proficient you may be in street brawls!"

"Will you put a postscript on for me," I called after him as he walked away. "Tell 'em I'm kind of busy just now and can't use any advice — no matter who it comes from."

Milk River and I went on to the Canon House.

Vickers, the sallow, pudgy proprietor, was at the door.

"If you think I got towels to mop up the blood from every hombre that gets himself beat up, you're mistaken," he growled at me. "And I don't want no sheets torn up for bandages, neither!"

"I never seen such a disagreeable cuss as you are," Milk River insisted as we climbed the stairs. "Seems like you can't get along with nobody. Don't you never make no friends?"

"Only with saps!"

I did what I could with water and adhesive tape to reclaim my face, but the result was a long way from beauty. Milk River sat on the bed and grinned and watched me.

My patching finished, we went down to the Toad's for food. Three eaters were sitting at the counter. I had to exchange comments on the battle with them while I ate.

We were interrupted by the running of horses in the street. A dozen or more men went past the door, and we could hear them pulling up sharply, dismounting, in front of Bardell's.

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Milk River leaned sidewise until his mouth was close to my ear.

"Big 'Nacio's crew from down the cañon. You better hold on tight, chief, or they'll shake the town from under you."

We finished our meal and went out to the street.

In the glow from the big lamp over Bardell's door a Mexican lounged against the wall. A big black-bearded man, his clothes gay with silver buttons, two white-handled guns holstered low on his thighs.

"Will you take the horses over to the stable?" I asked Milk River. "I'm going up and lie across the bed and grow strength again."

He looked at me curiously, and went over to where we had left the ponies.

I stopped in front of the bearded Mexican, and pointed with my cigarette at his guns.

"You're supposed to take those things off when you come to town," I said pleasantly. "Matter of fact, you're not supposed to bring 'em in at all, but I'm not inquisitive enough to look under a man's coat for them."

Beard and mustache parted to show a smiling curve of yellow teeth.

"Mebbe if *el senor jerife* no lak t'ese t'ings, he lak try take t'em 'way?"

"No. *You* put 'em away."

"I lak t'em here. I wear t'em here."

"You do what I tell you," I said, still pleasantly, and left him, going back to the Toad's shack.

Leaning over the counter, I picked the sawed-off shotgun out of its nest.

"Can I borrow this? I want to make a believer out of a guy."

"Yes, sir, sure! You help yourself!"

I cocked both barrels before I stepped outdoors.

The big Mexican wasn't in sight. I found him inside, telling his friends about it. Some of his friends were Mexican, some American, some God knows what. All wore guns.

The big Mexican turned when his friends gaped past him at me. His hands dropped to his guns as he turned, but he didn't draw.

"I don't know what's in this cannon," I told the truth, centering the riot gun on the company, "maybe pieces of barbed wire and dynamite shavings. We'll find out if you birds don't start piling your guns on the bar right away — because I'll sure-God splash you with it!"

They piled their weapons on the bar. I didn't blame them. This thing in my hands would have mangled them plenty!

"After this, when you come to Corkscrew, put your guns out of sight."

Fat Bardell pushed through them, putting joviality back on his face.

"Will you tuck these guns away until your customers are ready to leave town?" I asked him.

"Yes! Yes! Be glad to!" he exclaimed when he had got over his surprise.

I returned the shotgun to its owner and went up to the Cañon House.

A door just a room or two from

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mine opened as I walked down the hall. Chick Orr came out, saying:

"Don't do nothin' I wouldn't do," over his shoulder.

I saw Clio Landes standing inside the door.

Chick turned from the door, saw me, and stopped, scowling at me.

"You can't fight worth a damn!" he said. "All you know is how to hit!"

"That's right."

He rubbed a swollen hand over his belly.

"I never could learn to take 'em down there. That's what beat me in the profesh. But don't pick no more fights with me — I might hurt you!"

He poked me in the ribs with a thumb, and went on past me, down the stairs.

The girl's door was closed when I passed it. In my room, I dug out my fountain pen and paper, and had three words of my report written when a knock sounded on my door.

"Come in," I called, having left the door unlocked for Milk River.

Clio Landes pushed the door open.

"Busy?"

"No. Come in and make yourself comfortable. Milk River will be along in a few minutes."

"You're not foxing Milk River, are you?" she asked point-blank.

"No. I got nothing to hang on him. He's right so far as I'm concerned. Why?"

"Nothing, only I thought there might be a caper or two you were trying to cop him for. You're not fooling me. These hicks think you're a bust, but I know different."

"Thanks for those few kind words. But don't be press-agenting my wisdom around. I've had enough advertising. What are you doing out here in the sticks?"

"Lunger!" She tapped her chest. "A croaker told me I'd last longer out here. Like a boob, I fell for it. Living out here isn't any different from dying in the big city."

"How long have you been away from the noise?"

"Three years — a couple up in Colorado, and then this hole. Seems like three centuries."

"I was back there on a job in April," I led her on, "for two or three weeks."

"You were?"

It was just as if I'd said I had been to heaven. She began to shoot questions at me: was this still so-and-so? Was that still thus?

We had quite a little gabfest, and I found I knew some of her friends. A couple of them were high-class swindlers, one was a bootleg magnate, and the rest were a mixture of bookies, con-men, and the like.

I couldn't find out what her grift was. She talked a blend of thieves' slang and high-school English, and didn't say much about herself.

We were getting along fine when Milk River came in.

"My friends still in town?" I asked.

"Yes. I hear 'em bubbling around down in Bardell's. I hear you've been makin' yourself more unpopular."

"What now?"

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"Your friends among the better element don't seem to think a whole lot of that trick of yours of giving Big 'Nacio's guns, and his hombres', to Bardell to keep. The general opinion seems to be you took the guns out of their right hands and put 'em back in the left."

"I only took 'em to show that I could," I explained. "I didn't want 'em. They would have got more anyway. I think I'll go down and show myself to 'em. I won't be long."

The Border Palace was noisy and busy. None of Big 'Nacio's friends paid any attention to me. Bardell came across the room to tell me:

"I'm glad you backed the boys down. Saved me a lot of trouble."

I nodded and went out, around to the livery stable, where I found the night man hugging a little iron stove in the office.

"Got anybody who can ride to Filmer with a message tonight?"

"Maybe I can find somebody," he said without enthusiasm.

"Give him a good horse and send him up to the hotel as soon as you can," I requested.

I sat on the edge of the Cañon House porch until a long-legged lad of eighteen or so arrived on a pinto pony and asked for the deputy sheriff. I left the shadow I had been sitting in, and went down into the street, where I could talk to the boy without having an audience.

"Th' old man said yuh wanted to send somethin' to Filmer."

"Can you head out of here toward Filmer, and then cross over to the Circle H. A. R.?"

"Yes, suh, I c'n do that."

"Well, that's what I want. When you get there, tell Peery that Big 'Nacio and his men are in town, and might be riding that way before morning."

"I'll do jus' that, suh."

"This is yours, I'll pay the stable bill later." I slid a bill into his hand. "Get going, and don't let the information get out to anybody else."

Up in my room again, I found Milk River and the girl sitting around a bottle of liquor. We talked and smoked a while, and then the party broke up. Milk River told me he had the room next to mine.

Milk River's knuckles on the door brought me out of bed to shiver in the cold of five-something in the morning.

"This isn't a farm!" I grumbled at him as I let him in. "You're in the city now. You're supposed to sleep until the sun comes up."

"The eye of the law ain't never supposed to sleep," he grinned at me, his teeth clicking together, because he hadn't any more clothes on than I. "Fisher, who's got a ranch out thataway, sent a man in to tell you that there's a battle going on out at the Circle H. A. R. He hit my door instead of yours. Do we ride out thataway, chief?"

"We do. Hunt up some rifles, water, and the horses. I'll be down at the Toad's, ordering breakfast and getting some lunch wrapped up."

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Forty minutes later Milk River and I were out of Corkscrew.

The morning warmed as we rode, the sun making long violet pictures on the desert, raising the dew in a softening mist. The mesquite was fragrant, and even the sand — which would be as nice as a dusty stove-top later — had a fresh, pleasant odor.

Up over the ranch buildings, as we approached, three blue spots that were buzzards circled, and a moving animal showed against the sky for an instant on a distant ridge.

"A bronc that ought to have a rider and ain't," Milk River pronounced it.

Farther along, we passed a bullet-riddled Mexican sombrero, and then the sun sparkled on a handful of empty brass cartridges.

One of the ranch buildings was a charred black pile. Nearby another one of the men I had disarmed in Bardell's lay dead on his back.

A bandaged head poked around a building-corner, and its owner stepped out, his right arm in a sling, a revolver in his left. Behind him trotted the one-eyed Chinese cook, swinging a cleaver.

Milk River recognized the bandaged man.

"Howdy, Red! Been quarreling?"

"Some. We took all th' advantage we could of th' warnin' you sent out, an' when Big 'Nacio an' his herd showed up just 'fore daylight, we Injuned them all over the county. I stopped a couple o' slugs, so I stayed to home whilst th' rest o' th' boys followed south. 'F you listen sharp, you can hear a pop now an' then."

"Do we follow 'em, or head 'em?" Milk River asked me.

"Can we head 'em?"

"Might. If Big 'Nacio's running, he'll circle back to his rancho along about dark. If we cut into the cañon, and slide along down, maybe we can be there first. He won't make much speed having to fight off Peery and the boys as he goes."

"We'll try it."

Milk River leading, we went past the ranch buildings, and on down the draw, going into the cañon at the point where I had entered it the previous day. After a while the footing got better, and we made better time.

At noon we stopped to rest the horses, eat a couple of sandwiches, and smoke a bit. Then we went on.

Presently the sun passed, began to crawl down on our right, and shadows grew in the cañon. The welcome shade had reached the east wall when Milk River, in front, stopped.

"Around this next bend it is."

We dismounted, took a drink apiece, blew the sand off our rifles, and went forward afoot, toward a clump of bushes that covered the crooked cañon's next twist.

Beyond the bend, the floor of the cañon ran downhill into a round saucer. The saucer's sides sloped gently up to the desert floor. In the middle of the saucer, four low adobe buildings sat. In spite of their exposure to the desert sun, they looked somehow damp and dark. From one of them a thin plume of smoke rose.

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No man, no animal was in sight.

"I'm going to prospect down there," Milk River said, handing me his hat and rifle.

"Right," I agreed. "I'll cover you, but if anything breaks, you'd better get out of the way. I'm not the most dependable rifle-shot in the world!"

For the first part of his trip Milk River had plenty of cover. He went ahead rapidly. The screening plants grew fewer. His pace fell off. Flat on the ground, he squirmed from clump to boulder, from hummock to bush.

Thirty feet from the nearest building, he ran out of places to hide, and he jumped up and sprinted to the shelter of the nearest building.

Nothing happened. He crouched against the wall for several long minutes, and then began to work his way toward the rear.

A Mexican came around the corner.

I couldn't make out his features, but I saw his body stiffen.

His hand went to his waist.

Milk River's gun flashed.

The Mexican dropped. The bright steel of his knife glittered high over Milk River's head, and rang when it landed on a stone.

Milk River went out of my sight around the building. When I saw him again he was charging at the black doorway of the second building.

Fire-streaks came out of the door to meet him.

I did what I could with the two rifles — laying a barrage ahead of him — pumping lead at the open door, as fast as I could get it out. I emptied the second rifle just as he got too close to the door for me to risk another shot.

Dropping the rifle, I ran back to my horse, and rode to my crazy assistant's assistance.

He didn't need any. It was all over when I arrived.

He was driving another Mexican and Gyp Rainey out of the building with the nozzles of his guns.

"This is the crop," he greeted me. "Leastways, I couldn't find no more."

"What are you doing here?" I asked Rainey.

But the hop-head looked sullenly at the ground and made no reply.

"We'll tie 'em up," I decided, "and then look around."

Milk River did most of the tying, having had more experience with ropes.

He trussed them back to back on the ground, and we went exploring.

Except for plenty of guns of all sizes and more than plenty of ammunition to fit, we didn't find anything very exciting until we came to a heavy door — barred and padlocked — set half in the foundation of the principal building, half in the mound on which the building sat.

I found a broken piece of rusty pick, and knocked the padlock off with it. Then we took the bar off and swung the door open.

Men came eagerly toward us out of an unventilated, unlighted cellar. Seven men who talked a medley of languages as they came.

We used our guns to stop them.

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Their jabbering went high, excited.

"Quiet!" I yelled at them.

They knew what I meant, even if they didn't understand the word. The babel stopped and we looked them over. All seven seemed to be foreigners — and a hard-looking gang of cutthroats.

Milk River and I tried them out with English first, and then with what Spanish we could scrape up between us. Both attempts brought a lot of jabbering from them, but nothing in either of those languages.

"Got anything else?" I asked Milk River.

"Chinook is all that's left."

That wouldn't help much. I tried to remember some of the words we used to think were French in the A. E. F.

"*Que désirez-vous?*" brought a bright smile to the fat face of a blue-eyed man.

I caught "*Nous àllons à les États-Unis*" before the speed with which he threw the words at me confused me beyond recognizing anything else.

That was funny. Big 'Nacio hadn't let these birds know that they were already in the United States. I suppose he could manage them better if they thought they were still in Mexico.

"*Montrez-moi votre passe-port.*"

That brought a sputtering protest from Blue Eyes. They had been told no passports were necessary. It was because they had been refused passports that they were paying to be smuggled in.

"*Quand êtes-vous venu ici?*"

Hier meant yesterday, regardless of what the other things he put in his answer were. Big 'Nacio had come straight to Corkscrew after bringing these men across the border and sticking them in his cellar, then.

We locked the immigrants in their cellar again, putting Rainey and the Mexican in with them. Rainey howled like a wolf when I took his hypodermic needle and his coke away from him.

"Sneak up and take a look at the country," I told Milk River, "while I plant the man you killed."

By the time he came back I had the dead Mexican arranged to suit me: slumped down in a chair a little off from the front door of the principal building, his back against the wall, a sombrero tilted down over his face.

"There's dust kicking up some ways off," Milk River reported. "Wouldn't surprise me none if we got our company along towards dark."

Darkness had been solid for an hour when they came.

By then, fed and rested, we were ready for them. A light was burning in the house. Milk River was in there, tinkling a mandolin. Light came out of the open front door to show the dead Mexican dimly — a statue of a sleeper. Beyond him, around the corner except for my eyes and forehead, I lay close to the wall.

We could hear our company long before we could see them. Two horses — but they made enough noise for ten — coming lickety-split.

Big 'Nacio, in front, was out of the saddle and had one foot in the door-

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way before his horse's front feet — thrown high by the violence with which the big man had pulled him up — hit the ground again. The second rider was close behind him.

The bearded man saw the corpse. He jumped at it, swinging his quirt, roaring:

"*Arriba, piojo!*"

The mandolin's tinkling stopped.

I scrambled up.

Big 'Nacio's whiskers went down in surprise.

His quirt caught a button of the dead man's clothes, tangled there, the loop on its other end holding one of Big 'Nacio's wrists.

His other hand went to his thigh.

My gun had been in my hand for an hour. I was close. I had leisure to pick my target. When his hand touched his gun-butt, I put a bullet through hand and thigh.

As he fell, I saw Milk River knock the second man down with a clout of gun-barrel on back of his head.

"Seems like we team-up pretty good," the sunburned boy said as he stooped to take the enemy's weapons from them.

The bearded man's bellowing oaths made conversation difficult.

"I'll put this one you beaned in the cooler," I said. "Watch 'Nacio, and we'll patch him up when I come back."

I dragged the unconscious man halfway to the cellar door before he came to. I goaded him the rest of the way with my gun, shooed him indoors, shooed the other prisoners away from the door and closed and barred it.

The bearded man had stopped howling when I returned.

"Anybody riding after you?" I asked, as I knelt beside him and began cutting his pants away with my pocket knife.

For answer to that I got a lot of information about myself, my habits, my ancestors. None of it happened to be the truth, but it was colorful.

"Maybe we'd better put a hobble on his tongue," Milk River suggested.

"No. Let him cry!" I spoke to the bearded man again. "If I were you, I'd answer that question. If it happens that the Circle H. A. R. riders trail you here and take us unawares, it's a gut that you're in for a lynching.

He hadn't thought of that.

"*Sí, sí.* T'at Peery an' hees hombres. T'ey *seguir — mucho rapidez!*"

"Any of your men left, besides you and this other?"

"No! *Ningún!*"

"Suppose you build as much fire as you can out here in front while I'm stopping this egg's bleeding, Milk River."

The lad looked disappointed.

"Ain't we going to bushwack them waddies none?"

"Not unless we have to."

By the time I had put a couple of tourniquets on the Mexican, Milk River had a roaring fire lighting the buildings and most of the saucer in which they sat. I had intended stowing 'Nacio and Milk River indoors, in case I couldn't make Peery talk sense. But there wasn't time. I had just

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started to explain my plan to Milk River when Peery's bass voice came from outside the ring of light.

"Put 'em up, everybody!"

"Easy!" I cautioned Milk River, and stood up. But I didn't raise my hands.

"The excitement's over," I called. "Come on down."

Ten minutes passed. Peery rode into the light. His square-jawed face was grime-streaked and grim. His horse was muddy lather all over. His guns were in his hands.

Behind him rode Dunne — as dirty, as grim, as ready with his firearms.

Nobody followed Dunne. The others were spread around us in the darkness, then.

Peery leaned over his pony's head to look at Big 'Nacio, who was lying breathlessly still on the ground.

"Dead?"

"No — a slug through hand and leg. I've got some of his friends under lock and key indoors."

Mad red rims showed around Peery's eyes in the firelight.

"You can keep the others," he said harshly. "This hombre will do us."

I didn't misunderstand him.

"I'm keeping all of them."

"I ain't got a damned bit of confidence in you," Peery growled down at me. I'm making sure that his Big 'Nacio's riding stops right here. I'm taking care of him myself."

"Nothing stirring!"

"How you figuring on keeping me from taking him?" he laughed viciously at me. "You don't think me and Irish are alone, do you? If you don't believe you're corralled, make a play!"

I believed him, but —

"That doesn't make any difference. If I were a grub-line rider, or a desert rat, or any lone guy with no connections, you'd rub me out quick enough. But I'm not, and you know I'm not. I'm counting on that. You've got to kill me to take 'Nacio. That's flat! I don't think you want him bad enough to go that far."

He stared at me for a while. Then his knees urged his horse toward the Mexican. 'Nacio sat up and began pleading with me to save him.

Slowly I raised my right hand to my shoulder-holstered gun.

"Drop it!" Peery ordered, both his guns close to my head.

I grinned at him, took my gun out slowly, slowly turned it until it was level between his two.

We held that pose long enough to work up a good sweat apiece. It wasn't restful!

A queer light flickered in his red-rimmed eyes. I didn't guess what was coming until too late.

His left-hand gun swung away from me — exploded.

A hole opened in the top of Big 'Nacio's head. He pitched over on his side.

The grinning Milk River shot Peery out of the saddle.

I was under Peery's right-hand gun when it went off. I was scrambling under his rearing horse's feet.

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Dunne's revolvers coughed.

"Inside!" I yelled to Milk River, and put two bullets into Dunne's pony.

Rifle bullets sang every which way across, around, under, over us.

Inside the lighted doorway Milk River hugged the floor, spouting fire and lead from both hands.

Dunne's horse was down. Dunne got up — caught both hands to his face — went down beside his horse.

Milk River turned off the fireworks long enough for me to dash over him into the house.

While I smashed the lamp chimney, blew out the flame, he slammed the door.

Bullets made music on door and wall.

"Did I do right, shooting that jigger?" Milk River asked.

"Good work!" I lied.

There was no use bellyaching over what was done, but I hadn't wanted Peery dead. Dunne's death was unnecessary, too. The proper place for guns, is after talk has failed, and I hadn't run out of words by any means when this brown-skinned lad had gone into action.

The bullets stopped punching holes in our door.

"The boys have got their heads together," Milk River guessed. "They can't have a hell of a lot of caps left if they've been snapping them at 'Nacio since early morning."

I found a white handkerchief in my pocket and began stuffing one corner in a rifle muzzle.

"What's that for?" Milk River asked.

"Talk." I moved to the door. "And you're to hold your hand until I'm through."

"I never seen such a hombre for making talk," he complained.

I opened the door a cautious crack. Nothing happened. I eased the rifle through the crack and waved it in the light of the still burning fire. Nothing happened. I opened the door and stepped out.

"Send somebody down to talk!" I yelled at the outer darkness.

A voice I didn't recognize cursed bitterly, and began a threat:

"We'll give yuh —"

It broke off in silence.

Metal glinted off to one side.

Buck Small, his bulging eyes dark-circled, a smear of blood on one cheek, came into the light.

"What are you people figuring on doing?" I asked.

He looked sullenly at me.

"We're figurin' on gettin' that Milk River party. We ain't got nothin' against you. You're doin' what you're paid to do. But Milk River hadn't ought of killed Peery!"

"You boys want to take a tumble to yourselves, Buck. The wild and woolly days are over. You're in the clear so far. 'Nacio jumped you, and you did what was right when you massacred his riders all over the desert. But you've got no right to fool with my prisoners. Peery wouldn't understand that. And if we hadn't shot him, he'd have swung later!

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"For Milk River's end of it: he doesn't owe you anything. He dropped Peery under your guns — dropped him with less than an even break! You people had the cards stacked against us. Milk River took a chance you or I wouldn't have taken. You've got nothing to howl about.

"I've got ten prisoners in there, and I've got a lot of guns, and stuff to put in 'em. If you make me do it, I'm going to deal out the guns to my prisoners and let 'em fight. I'd rather lose every damned one of them that way than let you take 'em.

"All that you boys can get out of fighting us is a lot of grief — whether you win or lose. This end of Orilla County has been left to itself longer than most of the Southwest. But those days are over. Outside money has come into it; outside people are coming. You can't buck it! Men tried that in the old days, and failed. Will you talk it over with the others?"

"Yeah," and he went away in the darkness.

I went indoors.

"I think they'll be sensible," I told Milk River, "but you can't tell. So maybe you better hunt around and see if you can find a way through the floor to our basement hoosgow, because I meant what I said about giving guns to our captives."

Twenty minutes later Buck Small was back.

"You win," he said. "We want to take Peery and Dunne with us."

Nothing ever looked better to me than my bed in the Cañon House the next — Wednesday — night. My grandstand play with the yellow horse, my fight with Chick Orr, the unaccustomed riding I had been doing — these things had filled me fuller of aches than Orilla County was of sand.

Our ten prisoners were resting in an old outdoor store-room of Adderly's, guarded by volunteers from among the better element, under the supervision of Milk River. They would be safe there, I thought, until the immigration inspectors — to whom I had sent word — could come for them. Most of Big 'Nacio's men had been killed in the fight with the Circle H. A. R. hands, and I didn't think Bardell could collect men enough to try to open my prison.

The Circle H. A. R. riders would behave reasonably well from now on, I thought. There were two angles still open, but the end of my job in Corkscrew wasn't far away. So I wasn't dissatisfied with myself as I got stiffly out of my clothes and climbed into bed for the sleep I had earned.

Did I get it? No.

I was just comfortably bedded down when somebody began thumping on my door.

It was fussy little Dr. Haley.

"I was called into your temporary prison a few minutes ago to look at Rainey," the doctor said. "He tried to escape, and broke his arm in a fight with one of the guards. That isn't serious, but the man's condition is. He should be given some cocaine. I don't think that it is safe to leave him

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without the drug any longer.

"Is he really in bad shape?"

"Yes."

"I'll go down and talk to him," I said, reluctantly starting to dress again. "I gave him a shot now and then on the way up from the rancho — enough to keep him from falling down on us. But I want to get some information out of him now, and he gets no more until he'll talk."

We could hear Rainey's howling before we reached the jail.

Milk River was talking to one of the guards.

"He's going to throw a joe on you, chief, if you don't give him a pill," Milk River told me. "I got him tied up now, so's he can't pull the splints off his arm. He's plumb crazy!"

The doctor and I went inside, the guard holding a lantern high at the door so we could see.

In one corner of the room, Gyp Rainey sat in the chair to which Milk River had tied him. Froth was in the corners of his mouth. He was writhing with cramps.

"For Christ's sake give me a shot!" Rainey whined at me.

"Give me a hand, Doctor, and we'll carry him out."

We lifted him, chair and all, and carried him outside.

"Now stop your bawling and listen to me," I ordered. "You shot Nisbet. I want the straight story of it. The straight story will bring you a shot."

"I didn't kill him!" he screamed.

"That's a lie. You stole Peery's rope while the rest of us were in Bardell's place Monday morning, talking over Slim's death. You tied the rope where it would look like the murderer had made a getaway down the cañon. Then you stood at the window until Nisbet came into the back room — and you shot him. Nobody went down that rope — or Milk River would have found some sign. Will you come through?"

He wouldn't. He screamed and cursed and pleaded and denied knowledge of the murder.

"Back you go!" I said.

Dr. Haley put a hand on my arm.

"I don't want you to think I am interfering, but I really must warn you that what you're doing is dangerous. It is my belief, and my duty to advise you, that you are endangering this man's life by refusing him the drug."

"I know it, Doctor, but I'll have to risk it. He's not so far gone, or he wouldn't be lying. When the sharp edge of the drug-hunger hits him, he'll talk!"

Gyp Rainey stowed away again, I went back to my room. But not to bed.

Clio Landes was waiting for me, sitting there — I had left the door unlocked — with a bottle of whisky. She was about three-quarters lit up — one of those melancholy lushes.

She was a poor, sick, lonely, homesick girl, far away from her world. She dosed herself with alcohol, remembered her dead parents, sad bits of her childhood and unfortunate slices of her past, and cried over them.

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It was close to four o'clock Thursday morning when the whisky finally answered my prayers, and she went to sleep on my shoulder.

I picked her up and carried her down the hall to her own room. Just as I reached her door, fat Bardell came up the stairs.

"More work for the sheriff," he commented jovially, and went on.

The sun was high and the room was hot when I woke to the familiar sound of someone knocking on the door. This time it was one of the volunteer guards — the long-legged boy who had carried the warning to Peery Monday night.

"Gyp wants t' see yuh." The boy's face was haggard. "He wants yuh more'n I ever seen a man want anything."

Rainey was a wreck when I got to him.

"I killed him! I killed him!" he shrieked at me. "Bardell knowed the Circle H. A. R. would hit back f'r Slim's killin'. He made me kill Nisbet an' stack th' deal agin Peery so's it'd be up t' you t' go up agin 'em. He'd tried it before an' got th' worst of it!

"Gimme a shot! That's th' God's truth! I stoled th' rope, planted it, an' shot Nisbet wit' Bardell's gun when Bardell sent him back there! Th' gun's under th' tin-can dump in back o' Adderly's, Gimme th' shot!"

"Where's Milk River?" I asked the long-legged boy.

"Sleepin', I reckon. He left along about daylight."

"All right, Gyp! Hold it until the doc gets here. I'll send him over!"

I found Dr. Haley in his house. A minute later he was carrying a charge over to the hypo.

The Border Palace didn't open until noon. Its doors were locked. I went up the street to the Cañon House. Milk River came out just as I stepped up on the porch.

"Hello, young fellow," I greeted him. "Got any idea which room your friend Bardell reposes in?"

He looked at me as if he had never seen me before.

"S'pose you find out for yourself. I'm through doing your chores. You can find yourself a new wet nurse, Mister, or you can go to hell!"

The odor of whisky came out with the words, but he wasn't drunk enough for that to be the whole explanation.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked.

"What's the matter is I think you're a lousy —"

I didn't let it get any farther.

His right hand whipped to his side as I stepped in.

I jammed him between the wall and my hip before he could draw, and got one of my hands on each of his arms.

"You may be a curly wolf with your rod," I growled, shaking him, a lot more peeved than if he had been a stranger, "but if you try any of your monkey business on me, I'll turn you over my knee!"

Clio Landes' thin fingers dug into my arm.

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"Stop it!" she cried. "Stop it! Why don't you behave?" to Milk River; and to me: "He's sore over something this morning. He doesn't mean what he says!"

I was sore myself.

"I mean what I said," I insisted.

But I took my hands off him, and went indoors. Inside the door I ran into sallow Vickers.

"What room is Bardell's?"

"214. Why?"

I went on past him and upstairs.

My gun in one hand, I used the other to knock on Bardell's door.

"Who is it?" came through.

I told him.

"What do you want?"

I said I wanted to talk to him.

He kept me waiting for a couple of minutes before he opened. He was half-dressed. All his clothes below the waist were on. Above, he had a coat on over his undershirt, and one of his hands was in his coat pocket.

His eyes jumped big when they lit on my gun.

"You're arrested for Nisbet's murder!" I informed him. "Take your hand out of your pocket."

He tried to look as if he thought I was kidding him.

"For Nisbet's murder?"

"Uh-huh. Rainey came through."

"Take your hand out of your pocket."

His eyes moved from mine to look past my head, a flash of triumph burning in them.

I beat him to the first shot by a hairline, since he had wasted time waiting for me to fall for that ancient trick.

His bullet cut my neck.

Mine took him where his undershirt was tight over his fat chest.

He fell, tugging at his pocket, trying to get the gun out for another shot.

I could have jumped him, but he was going to die anyhow. That first bullet had got his lungs. I put another into him.

The hall filled with people.

"Get the doctor!" I called to them.

But Bardell didn't need him. He was dead before I had the words out.

Chick Orr came through the crowd, into the room.

I stood up, sticking my gun back in its holster.

"I've got nothing on you, Chick, yet," I said slowly. "You know better than I do whether there is anything to get or not. If I were you, I'd drift out of Corkscrew without wasting too much time packing up."

The ex-pug squinted his eyes at me, rubbed his chin, and made a clucking sound in his mouth.

" 'F anybody asks for me, you tell 'em I'm off on a tour," and he pushed out through the crowd again.

When the doctor came, I took him up the hall to my room, where he patched my neck. The wound wasn't much, but it bled a lot.

After he had finished, I got fresh clothes from my bag and undressed. But when I went to wash, I found the doctor had used all my water. Getting into coat, pants and shoes, I went down to the kitchen for more.

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The hall was empty when I came upstairs again, except for Clio Landes.

She went past me deliberately not looking at me.

I washed, dressed, and strapped on my gun. One more angle to be cleaned up, and I would be through. I didn't think I'd need the .32 toys any more, so I put them away. One more angle, and I was done. I was pleased with the idea of getting away from Corkscrew. I didn't like the place, had never liked it, liked it less than ever since Milk River's break.

I was thinking about him when I stepped out of the hotel — to see him standing across the street.

I didn't give him a tumble, but turned toward the lower end of the street.

One step. A bullet kicked up dirt at my feet.

I stopped.

"Go for it, fat boy!" Milk River yelled. "It's me or you!"

I turned slowly to face him, looking for an out. But there wasn't any.

His eyes were insane-lighted slits. His face was a ghastly savage mask. He was beyond reasoning with.

"It's me or you!" he repeated, and put another bullet into the ground in front of me. "Warm your iron!"

I stopped looking for an out and went for my gun.

He gave me an even break.

His gun swung down to me as mine straightened to him.

We pulled triggers together.

Flame jumped at me.

I smacked the ground — my right side all numb.

He was staring at me — bewildered. I stopped staring at him, and looked at my gun — the gun that had only clicked when I pulled the trigger!

When I looked up again, he was coming toward me, slowly, his gun hanging at his side.

"Played it safe, huh?" I raised my gun so he could see the broken firing-pin. "Serves me right for leaving it on the bed when I went downstairs for water."

Milk River dropped his gun — grabbed mine.

Clio Landes came running from the hotel to him.

"You're not —?"

Milk River stuck my gun in her face.

"You done that?"

"I was afraid he —" she began.

"You —— ——!"

With the back of an open hand, Milk River struck the girl's mouth.

He dropped down beside me, his face a boy's face. A tear fell hot on my hand.

"Chief, I didn't —"

"That's all right," I assured him, and I meant it.

I missed whatever else he said. The numbness was leaving my side, and the feeling that came in its place wasn't pleasant. Everything stirred inside me. . . .

I was in bed when I came to. Dr. Haley was doing disagreeable things to my side. Behind him, Milk River

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held a basin in unsteady hands.

"Milk River," I whispered, because that was the best I could do in the way of talk.

He bent his ear to me.

"Get the Toad. He killed Vogel. Careful — gun on him. Talk self-defense — maybe confess. Lock him up with others."

Sweet sleep again.

Night, dim lamplight was in the room when I opened my eyes again. Clio Landes sat beside my bed, staring at the floor, woebegone.

"Good evening," I managed.

I was sorry I had said anything.

She cried all over me and kept me busy assuring her she had been forgiven for the trickery with my gun. I don't know how many times I forgave her. It got to be a damned nuisance.

I had to shut my eyes and pretend I had passed out to shut her up.

I must have slept some, because when I looked around again it was day, and Milk River was in the chair.

He stood up, not looking at me, his head hanging.

"I'll be moving on, Chief, now that you're coming around all right. I want you to know, though, that if I'd knowed what that —— done to your gun I wouldn't never have throwed down on you."

"What was the matter with you, anyhow?" I growled at him.

"Crazy, I reckon," he mumbled. "I had a couple of drinks, and then Bardell filled me full of stuff about you and her, and that you was playing me for a Chinaman. And — and I just went plumb loco, I reckon."

"Any of it left in your system?"

"Hell, no, chief!"

"Then suppose you stop this foolishness and sit down and talk sense. Are you and the girl still on the outs?"

They were, most emphatically, most profanely.

"You're a big boob!" I told him. "She's a stranger out here, and homesick for her New York. I could talk her language and knew the people she knew. That's all there was —"

"But that ain't the big point, chief! Any woman that would pull a —"

"Bunk! It was a shabby trick, right enough. But a woman who'll pull a trick like that for you when you are in a jam is worth a million an ounce. Now you run out and find this Clio person, and bring her back with you!"

He pretended he was going reluctantly. But I heard her voice when he knocked on her door. And they let me lay there in my bed of pain for one solid hour before they remembered me. They came in walking so close together that they were stumbling over each other's feet.

"Now let's talk business," I grumbled. "What day is this?"

"Monday."

"Did you get the Toad?"

"I done that thing," Milk River said, dividing the one chair with the girl. "He's over to the county seat now — went over with the others. He swallowed that self-defense bait, and told me all about it. How'd you ever

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figure it out, chief?"

"Figure what out?"

"That the Toad killed poor old Slim. He says Slim come in there that night, woke him up, ate a dollar and ten cents' worth of grub on him, and then dared him to try and collect. In the argument that follows, Slim goes for his gun, and the Toad gets scared and shoots him — after which Slim obligingly staggers out o' doors to die. I can see all that clear enough, but how'd you hit on it?"

"I oughtn't give away my professional secrets, but I will this once. The Toad was cleaning house when I went in to ask him for what he knew about the killing, and he had scrubbed his floor before he started on the ceiling. If that meant anything at all, it meant that he had had to scrub his floor, and was making the cleaning general to cover it up. So maybe Slim had bled some on that floor.

"Starting from that point, the rest came easily enough. Slim leaving the Border Palace in a wicked frame of mind, broke after his earlier winning, humiliated by Nisbet's triumph in the gun-pulling, soured further by the stuff he had been drinking all day. Red Wheelan had reminded him that afternoon of the time the Toad had followed him to the ranch to collect two bits. What more likely than he'd carry his meanness into the Toad's shack? That Slim hadn't been shot with the shotgun didn't mean anything. I never had any faith in that shotgun from the first. If the Toad had been depending on that for his protection, he wouldn't have put it in plain sight, and under a shelf, where it wasn't easy to get out. I figured the shotgun was there for moral effect, and he'd have another one stowed out of sight for use.

"Another point you folks missed was that Nisbet seemed to be telling a straight story — not at all the sort of tale he'd have told if he were guilty. Bardell's and Chick's weren't so good, but the chances are they really thought Nisbet had killed Slim, and were trying to cover him up."

Milk River grinned at me, pulling the girl closer with the one arm that was around her.

"You ain't so downright dumb," he said. "Clio done warned me the first time she seen you that I'd best not try to run no sandies on you."

A far-away look came into his pale eyes.

"Think of all them folks that were killed and maimed and jailed — all over a dollar and ten cents. It's a good thing Slim didn't eat five dollars' worth of grub. He'd of depopulated the State of Arizona complete!"

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". . . and this is our 'unsolved crimes' file."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Helen McCloy, creator of detective Basil Willing (referred to with complete justification by Howard Haycraft as a "credible psychiatrist"), comes of a writing family. Her father, the late William C. McCloy, was Managing Editor of the "New York Evening Sun" for twenty years under the Dana-Laffan régime; at the time of his death, in 1940, he was an editorial writer for the North American Newspaper Alliance. The first reporter he hired, as a Spanish War correspondent, was Richard Harding Davis; the last reporter he took under his wing was Ira Wolfert, whom he engaged as a Pacific war correspondent.*

Of Quaker stock, Helen McCloy attended a Friends School in New York and finished her formal education in Europe where she lived a number of years. Her first published work was an article sold to the "Boston Evening Transcript" — at the age of fourteen. Her second earnings as an author resulted from the sale of a political article to the "London Morning Post." In France she served as Paris correspondent for "International Studio," and as art critic for Universal Service; at this time she was also making regular trips to London in order to contribute an English art letter to the "New York Times." This newspaper experience she later translated into material for her book, THE GOBLIN MARKET, *and the knowledge she gained as a European art critic accounts for the wealth of authentic detail she packed into her prize-winning story of 1946, "Chinoiserie."*

Some of her recent detective novels include PANIC *(1944) and* THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY *(1945); her latest book is* SHE WALKS ALONE, *published by Morrow.*

Helen McCloy is married to Davis Dresser, better known to his book, radio, and movie fans as Brett Halliday, creator of Mike Shayne.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CURTAIN

by HELEN McCLOY

FACE to face with the doctor, Letty hesitated. "It seems such a little thing, but it . . . bothers me."

"A dream?"

She nodded. "For the last eight months."

"Always the same dream?"

Her glance strayed from the doctor's face to his severely impersonal office. "It begins in all sorts of ways — different scenes, different situations. Sometimes there are policemen. Sometimes a courtroom. But it always works around quite plausibly to the same ending. I seem to be walking down a long empty corridor in an

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eternal twilight. Suddenly I come to a curtain hanging across the passage, blocking my way. It's only cloth. I could push it aside and go on. But I don't. I stand still within a few feet of it. And then I begin to be afraid.

"The curtain is dark. It hangs in deep, inverted folds, motionless, as if it were carved in stone. There is not a breath of air, but after a few moments the folds begin to ripple and the curtain bellies toward me. Then I know that there is something behind the curtain. Not someone — something. Something unspeakable. The essence of all terror and all evil. That's when I want to run away. I make a frantic effort to turn and run. But my feet are lumps of lead. They won't move. Panic mounts from my heart to my brain. I can't think. But there is worse to come. Some force outside myself — invisible and irresistible — lifts my feet from the ground and sets me floating giddily toward the curtain and . . . whatever lies on the other side . . .

"Honestly, doctor, I don't believe I could bear it if I didn't know all the time that I was dreaming."

The doctor's interest quickened. "You know that you are dreaming? While the dream is going on?"

"Of course. Don't you? Doesn't everybody?"

"No. That's what makes a nightmare terrifying to most people. They think it's real while it's going on. But you actually dream that you are dreaming?"

"Yes." Letty was disturbed. "Am I . . . different? I always know it isn't real. Even when the terror is throttling my heart, there is a tiny, detached voice at the back of my mind which keeps saying: *Don't be afraid. It's only a dream.*

"That small, sensible voice is the one thing that makes it bearable . . . until I'm lifted into the air, like a toy balloon that has slipped its tether, and wafted against my will toward the curtain. That's when it becomes unbearable."

"But you do bear it." The doctor smiled. "Because you have to."

"Oh, no." Letty smiled back. "I don't have to. And I don't."

"What do you mean?"

"I wake myself. I concentrate my whole attention on the tiny voice that whispers: *It's only a dream.* I answer it and say: *Then wake up. You can if you really want to. You can escape this terror by the simple act of waking. Open your eyes — quick! Before it's too late. Before you reach the other side of the curtain.* . . .

"You see," Letty went on earnestly, "I can't get away by running, but I can get away by waking. My body won't obey, but my mind will. And mental escape is just as good as physical escape — in a dream. I can't move from one place to another, but I can move from one state of consciousness to another. I summon all my force of will, all my power of concentration, to wake myself. I make a mental effort, that is curiously like a physical effort. Something clicks and — I'm awake. The dream

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shimmers a moment. Then it's gone. And that saves me."

"From what?"

"From . . . the other side of the curtain."

"Why not wake yourself sooner? When you first begin to dream?"

"I wish I could. But I can't do it until the urge to escape becomes almost unbearable. Even then I can only do it by making a great effort of will — an exhausting effort that leaves me weak and panting when I wake . . . You do believe me?"

"Why not?" He shrugged. "All the evidence we have about dreams is necessarily subjective. You have no motive that I can see for . . . embroidering. Some elements of your dream are common enough — the compulsion, the floating . . . But there's one detail you've omitted."

"I've told you everything."

"Not one thing." His voice dropped to a quiet, suggestive tone. "What is on the other side of the curtain?"

"I don't know." Letty paled. "I don't want to know. I only know that it's horrible and — it has been there, waiting, for a long time."

"Waiting for what?"

"For me."

"Have you any idea what would happen if you refrained from using this power to wake yourself? If you simply let yourself be wafted through the curtain?"

She shook her head.

"Why not try it?"

"I couldn't. You don't know what you're asking."

"But it's only a dream," he reminded her quizzically.

"It's easy to say that — here in the daylight with you. But in that grey twilight where I am all alone . . . The urge to escape is overwhelming."

"If you didn't will yourself to wake up, it might prove interesting psychologically. It might help me to help you."

"I couldn't." Letty was trembling. "I know that if I saw what is on the other side of that curtain I would . . . die . . . "

"Yet you haven't the slightest idea what is there?"

"No. I have no idea of its shape or color, its function or meaning. I know only one thing: it's something I must never know. Something I must escape."

"Will you promise me one thing?" He was playing with a pen on his desk. "If ever you do go beyond the curtain in this dream, will you let me know what you find there?"

"But I never will," said Letty quickly. "I shall always wake myself in time."

His glance considered her with a scientist's patient, impersonal curiosity. "Hasn't it occurred to you that you may lose this power of waking yourself?"

"Oh, no!" It was a cry of despair.

"I've known only one other person who had this power — a fellow student at medical school. He lost it when he was about thirteen — at puberty."

"I'm twenty-nine." Letty's voice faltered. "Did he — your friend —

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see behind the curtain?"

"He didn't dream about a curtain. And after he lost the power, he no longer had nightmares. But you may."

"Doctor, you've got to help me," insisted Letty. "I must get rid of this dream before I lose the power to wake myself. Why do I have this particular dream? That's what I came to find out."

"Let me ask you a question." He paused seeming to choose his words with care. "If you know while you are dreaming that the whole experience is nothing but a dream — why are you so afraid?"

Letty's glance shifted from his direct gaze. "I don't know. Dreams aren't logical."

"Life is not logical," returned the doctor. "So few people — so few scientists realize that. But dreams are logical. In their own way. Because, like logic, they are products of the human mind in its pure state — untrammelled by the limits of matter, space and time . . . I think I know why you feel fear so intensely in this dream even while you are realizing it is a dream and nothing more."

"Why?"

"Because the source of the fear is not in the dream itself but in your waking life. The curtain in the dream is only a symbol — a shadowy reflection of something real which you fear when you are awake. Waking or dreaming, you know subconsciously that the fear is real. That's why the fear persists even in the dream when you know that the curtain symbolizing the fear is only part of an illusion."

"But there is no fear in my waking life!" cried Letty. "Only in my dreams."

The doctor was skeptical. "Nothing comes out of the mind that has not once gone into it. It can't create. It only reflects. Every dream images waking experience. Fear, shame, guilt are things we repudiate or repress in the waking state. So they reappear in our dreams disguised as symbols. Analysis might reveal what source of fear you are repressing in your real life. Once we dug that up, you would be rid of your dream."

"That's Freudian, isn't it?" Letty's whole body seemed to recoil fastidiously. "I really don't care for the theories of Dr. Freud. And I have never had any occasion to fear a curtain in real life."

The doctor realized he had lost a patient. He was sorry because her case had roused his curiosity. No doubt she had hoped for a simple panacea: *Eat less meat . . . Take more exercise . . .* But he couldn't help her that way. The preliminary physical examination had shown nothing wrong organically . . . He was too curious to let her go without a few more questions.

"You may have forgotten the occasion. Or, more likely, the curtain is just a symbol. But the fear itself is real. What are you afraid of, Mrs. Jason?"

"Why . . . nothing . . ." All her openness was gone now. She was

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like one of those flowers that curls and closes every petal tightly at the first chill of sunset. "I am perfectly happy. I have no shameful past, no frustrated ambitions. I'm not afraid of anything."

"Then you are more fortunate than most," said the doctor with irony. "No financial worries?"

"No. My father left me an income that averages eight thousand a year. In a small town like Brookfield, that's ample."

"Happily married?"

"Yes, indeed." Her eyes brightened, her cheeks grew a shade pinker. "Only two months ago."

"And how long have you had this dream?"

"I told you. It began about eight months ago."

"Did anything particular happen to you about eight months ago?"

She answered promptly. Too promptly. "No. Nothing at all."

"You have many friends in Brookfield?"

"Oh, yes. My mother's and father's friends. My own school friends."

"And your husband's friends, too, no doubt?"

"Not so many. He only came to Brookfield a year ago. He doesn't know many people there."

"His profession?"

"He's an artist. But he hasn't been able to do much painting this last year because he's been having trouble with his eyes."

So he married a local heiress, thought the cynical doctor.

Innocently Letty shattered this hypothesis. "When I said I had eight thousand a year I forgot Ralph's six thousand. We're really quite comfortable on our combined incomes." She rose, pulling on gloves. "Thank you for letting me take up so much of your time. It's been a relief to talk."

A relief from what? He closed the door of the outer office regretfully. A pity most people thought their petty privacies more important than science. Analysis still had to overcome prejudice today, just as dissection did two hundred years ago. If only we could have "mind-snatching" like the old "body-snatching" . . .

The nurse-receptionist was busy with a card file on her own desk. He tossed the case card he was holding onto her blotter. "Put this in the inactive file. The lady won't be back. Acute case of well-bred reticence complicated by a Puritanical conscience."

"Something bothering that Puritanical conscience now?" The nurse picked up the card. "*Mrs. Ralph Jason* . . . Where have I heard that name before?" A startled look came into her eyes. "Why, that woman can't be Mrs. Ralph Jason. She's dead."

The doctor seemed indifferent. False names were not too uncommon with a certain type of inhibited patient. "How do you know Mrs. Ralph Jason is dead?"

"There was something about her in the papers. She was the wife of an artist living in Brookfield and she committed suicide. I noticed the

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name Jason at the time because I'd just been reading *Hercules, My Shipmate*. Golden Fleece and stuff."

"When was all this?"

"About eight months ago."

"Then this must be the second Mrs. Jason." The doctor pursed his lips. "I wonder . . ."

"What do you wonder, doctor?"

His eyes looked far away. "Just what is on the other side of that curtain. In her next dream she may find out . . ."

Letty seemed to be sitting in an armchair, dozing before her own fire. As usual in dreams, the scene appeared slightly out of focus. A scene shot from an erratic camera angle, revealing unfamiliar aspects of familiar objects. The room looked so long, as if one must travel an interminable distance to reach the hall archway at the other end. The ceiling seemed so high, so deep in shadow. Why was this half-imagined, half-remembered facsimile of the room so distorted by her dream-mind? Could it be the projection of some emotional disturbance?

Beyond the wavering circle of firelight, the pale green walls looked grey in the gloom. Even the vivid, jade-green of the rug was subdued to a dull olive. Jagged shadows moved against the walls in silent mimicry of the crackling flames.

As space was enlarged, time was delayed. Seconds seemed to pass slowly as minutes. As if the clockwork of the universe was running down, slackening almost imperceptibly, spacing each successive tick farther from its fellow; a leisurely unwinding of the coils of life and matter, a gradual resolution of all things into their component electrons that could end only in a universal stillness, darkness, and coldness.

When her hand reached for a cigarette it seemed to move with ponderous deliberation. When she struck a match the instant between friction and flash stretched agonizingly until she was not sure the flash would come at all and felt achievement when it did.

Even Ralph's face looked different across the hearth with his eyelids closed and his head resting against the back of the winged chair. Was it the oblique angle that made his chin look longer and harder, his mouth closer and narrower? Or was it the absence of the eyes, sealed under smooth, motionless lids? Open, the eyes were so jewel-bright, such an odd shade of sea-green, they distracted you from his other features. Subtract them, and his chin and mouth leaped into sudden prominence, suggesting unsuspected traits of character.

But then it was not the real Ralph sitting across this dream hearth. It was a mere shadow of the living Ralph — an image reflected in the dark, still pool of her sleeping mind and distorted, like the room. Withdrawn, impersonal — as if some barrier lay between them . . .

The sudden peal of the doorbell

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ripped through silence. Ralph's eyelids lifted. This was the smiling face she knew so well. She had an odd sense of recognition and relief. *Hello, Ralph, I'm glad you're back. Where were you a moment ago? Not here in this point of space-time with me . . .*

Her glance followed his to the clock. Five minutes after eleven. Too late for ordinary callers in Brookfield.

His lean body rose out of the chair in sections like a straightening jackknife. How faithfully her fertile dream-memory reproduced his every gait and gesture, all shaped and colored cunningly as life itself — all done in a flash. A few strides took his long legs down the room, through the archway. She heard the click of the hall switch, the grate of the door latch, the creak of a hinge. Then the mutter of a strange voice. Ralph's answer was pitched higher. "Why, of course. I can't imagine . . . but won't you come in?"

Lights blazed overhead. The walls seemed to leap toward her, the ceiling dropped, the whole room shrank. Fire-glow and dancing, attendant shadows were wiped out as if they had never existed. She felt constricted, almost imprisoned in this cube of harsh, yellow light the room enclosed. A fly in amber. Some instinct of self-defense rather than courtesy made her rise and turn toward the archway, her back to the fire. She wished to look her fate in the face and meet it standing.

They did not look like messengers of fate, the two men following Ralph through the archway. Either one could have served for the figure of John Q. Public in a political cartoon. The first was a stranger. Where had her dream-mind found the material for this animated mask? Some particular face, noticed briefly in a crowd, forgotten consciously, stored up unconsciously? Or was it a synthetic composite of all the strange faces she had ever seen? It must be one or the other. *Nothing comes out of the mind that has not once gone into it . . .* Someone had told her that quite recently . . .

It was a flat, meaty face. The grey hair looked thin and greasy, but the brows were still black, thick and bristling. An isolated tuft sprouted between the brows. The eyes were dogged and weary. Not intelligent. The eyes of a man who worked hard at some routine job.

The other man she recognized. Who could forget that albino rabbit face? The nibbling, pink mouth, the white-lashed, pink eyes that blinked so rapidly? She had seen him only for a moment this afternoon, loitering in a doorway when she left the doctor's office, standing beside another man whose face was hidden. And she had only noticed him then because she had a vague feeling she had seen him or someone like him once before, long ago . . . How like the vagrant dream-mind to conscript the face of an utter stranger, glimpsed so fleetingly on a city street, and introduce him into this dream-world. The dream-mind always seized upon some

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tiny incident of the day as raw material for that night's dream, the way a nesting bird seizes whatever lies at hand — a scrap of thread or paper — and builds it into the twig fabric of its nest. But unlike the bird, the dreamer could magnify his material, constructing a whole personality out of a half-remembered face or a whole dramatic sequence out of a half-realized sensation . . .

Ralph was speaking. "Letty, this is Captain Crane and Mr. Mather. Gentlemen, my wife."

From a great distance she seemed to hear her own voice: "Won't you sit down?"

She was in her own armchair, profile to the fire, hands clasped in her lap. Ralph was on the arm of his chair, filling his pipe. Crane and Mather sat side by side on the little sofa. Crane leaned back as if he were tired. Mather took pains to sit on Crane's right, perching gingerly as if he were embarrassed.

Ralph turned toward Letty, speaking slowly and distinctly. "Captain Crane is from the Police Department."

Silence came with the shock of a loud explosion. Police Department. POLICE DEPARTMENT . . . The words seemed to reverberate down the deepest tunnels of her mind, growing louder instead of fainter as they receded . . .

"He has a few questions to ask."

"A parking ticket?" Her voice cracked.

"No, Mrs. Jason." Crane turned to look at her gravely. "Doubtless you recall that eight months ago your husband's first wife, Olivia Jason, died of atropine poisoning."

"Atropine sulphate," put in Mather quietly.

Letty bowed because she could not speak. The flare of a match masked Ralph's face. Mather's eye caught Letty's. Hastily he looked in another direction. Who was Mather? Why was he here? He was past the retirement age of the Police Department. He was fat and out of condition. He was timid. Even the illogical dream-mind weaving this fantasy could not have cast him for the role of another policeman . . .

"The coroner's jury brought in a verdict of suicide." Crane's voice went on colorlessly. "For several reasons. Olivia Jason was a cripple. A motor accident had crippled her while Ralph Jason was driving. She blamed him for this and for the fact that internal injuries made it impossible for her to have a child. These things preyed on her mind. The coroner's verdict took all of them into consideration when it brought in a verdict of suicide while of unsound mind."

I must say something, thought Letty. But her tongue was stiff, her throat dry.

"The police accepted that verdict at the time, but —" Crane looked directly at Letty. "One thing troubled us, even then. We were unable to trace any purchase of atropine to Olivia Jason."

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"That isn't strange." Ralph had taken his pipestem out of his mouth. "Atropine sulphate occurs in several patent medicines. In this state they can be bought without a prescription. There are dozens of druggists in Brookfield and its suburbs. Each one has hundreds of customers. Why would any one druggist remember a single customer who made a single purchase of eyedrops?"

Crane pounced. "Why eyedrops, Mr. Jason? Atropine also occurs in rhinitis tablets and some ointments."

"Well, any of those." Ralph's lips closed over the pipestem.

Slowly Crane's head swung back toward Letty. "Olivia Jason couldn't drive at all. Even on crutches she could only walk a short distance. Alone, she could not have gone far beyond her own neighborhood. And she would hardly take anyone with her when she was buying poison for the purpose of suicide. A druggist might remember a crippled customer when he would forget others. Especially if he knew the cripple by sight. And all the druggists in Olivia Jason's neighborhood did know her by sight. She pestered all of them for some soporific that would ease the pain of her crippled legs."

At last Letty managed to speak. "I see."

"Do you?" A touch of sarcasm in Crane's voice. "Since the police accepted the verdict of the coroner's jury there have been two new developments which I would like you to explain — if you can."

Suddenly Letty was cold with that cold which seems to come from within, seeping out through blood vessels and tissue until, last of all, the skin itself is clammy.

Inexorably Crane went on: "First, you have married Ralph Jason. Second, we have traced a purchase of eyedrops containing atropine to you. A purchase that occurred a few days before Olivia Jason's death."

Letty tightened her clasped hands. This was nightmare. Sooner or later it would end as all her nightmares did — the corridor — the curtain — paralysis — a slow, inelectable drift toward the curtain — and whatever lay on the other side. The tiny voice at the back of her mind was whispering: *Don't be afraid. It's only a dream.* Mentally she answered as she always did: *Then wake up. You can if you really want to. You can escape all this terror by the simple act of waking. Open your eyes — quick — before you reach the other side of the curtain . . .*

Desperately she gathered her forces for the supreme mental effort that was so like a physical effort. But this time nothing happened. Her will slacked with a sudden, sickening limpness and the dream held. She couldn't quite achieve that oddly mechanical click that would release her from horror and put her back in her own bed between cool sheets, with Ralph beside her and maple leaves sighing in the dark beyond the open window . . . The doctor's voice came back to her: *You may lose this power of waking yourself . . .* Had she lost

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the power so soon? Could it be that those words of the doctor, so carelessly uttered, were acting now on her subconscious mind like a post-hypnotic suggestion, inhibiting that power to wake herself at will? But she wouldn't be able to bear it when she came to the curtain. If she couldn't wake then she would . . . die . . .

"Why shouldn't Letty buy eyedrops? Lots of people do!" That was Ralph's voice, but less firm than usual.

Does he . . . doubt me? The thought pierced Letty's heart like a knife. *Even in a dream I can't bear to have Ralph doubt me. Why should my own subconscious mind torture me by inventing such a dream? Nothing comes out of the mind that has not once gone into it . . . Have I had the idea that I might be accused of Olivia's murder all along, in the waking state, ever since her death? And that Ralph might suspect me? Of course, I have never allowed myself to think of such things consciously but . . . what has been going on in my subconscious mind all these months, since Olivia died?*

Captain Crane answered Ralph quietly. "Lots of people buy eyedrops who have something the matter with their eyes. Usually iritis when the drops contain atropine. Sometimes keratitis. We have examined the record of a medical examination given to Letty Jason when she was still Letty Knowles and applied for overseas service with the OWI during the war. Her eyes were normal then." He turned back to Letty. "Mrs. Jason, have you developed iritis or keratitis in the comparatively short time since then? If so, the fact can be established very simply by your submitting to an oculist's examination."

Letty heard her own voice, low and shaking. "My eyes are still perfectly normal."

"You don't have to answer him, dear!" That was Ralph.

"*I have to warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you?*" Letty's voice rose shrilly over the *cliché*. Then she laughed. "Is that it, Captain Crane?"

"I'm afraid it is, Mrs. Jason." To her amazement, she saw he was perfectly serious. "Unless you have some explanation of that purchase of atropine. I came here late this evening because I had to go through certain formalities first in order to secure a warrant for your arrest on a charge of murder in the first degree."

"Here! Wait a minute!" Ralph's pipe clattered on the hearthstone. He was on his feet, his green eyes feverbright, his thin cheeks flushed an unnatural red. "You say you've traced the purchase of eyedrops containing atropine to Letty. I suppose that means some fool druggist thought he recognized her photograph after eight months. Can you do a thing like this on one flimsy identification?"

"Identification and motive and a few other things that will come out at the trial," returned Crane. "It was not an identification by photograph either." He looked at Mather. A bead

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of sweat gathered on Mather's forehead. "This is the druggist, Mr. Mather," went on Crane. "He identified Letty Jason this afternoon when he stood with me outside the door of a doctor's office in the city and saw her come out. He was sure of the identification then, but I brought him with me this evening so he could see her at close range and be doubly sure. We had a pre-arranged signal. When he sat down on my right it meant that he was absolutely sure — that I could go ahead with the arrest."

"How can he be sure?" demanded Ralph. "When he only saw her once before, for a moment, eight months ago?"

"That will come out at the trial. Every murderer makes at least one slip. Fortunately for us Mrs. Jason was in a state of agitation when she bought the eyedrops and she made her one slip then."

Ralph whirled on Mather. "Are you sure? After all these months? Do you realize what you are doing to her?"

One moment ticked away while Mather looked into Letty's eyes. Then a strange thing happened — a thing she thought characteristic of the dream-world where there is no consistency or plausibility in the way people behave. Tears gathered in Mather's pink eyes — one, then two, trickled down his quivering cheeks. He was weeping for her and weeping for himself. He was an ordinary man leading an ordinary life. Suddenly circumstance had put the power of life and death into his flabby hands. He had never borne such a responsibility. He didn't want to bear it now. But he couldn't lie. He was too simple even to think of lying. Too innocent and too frightened.

"Yes. I'm sure," he whispered hoarsely. "I remember the light, taffy-colored hair and the dark, brown eyes and the three little moles that form a triangle on her right cheek. She looked so pretty when she ran in, hurried and hatless, asking for the eyedrops . . . that summer day . . . I'm sure, but . . . Oh, God! I wish I wasn't sure! I'm so sorry . . . so very sorry . . ."

"You're sorry!" Ralph's voice was hard. "You damned snivelling, sentimentalist! If you're so sorry, why didn't you keep your mouth shut?"

Letty felt Ralph's hands, warm and rough, against her icicle fingers. "Don't worry, darling. We'll get the best lawyer in the city. It's all a silly mistake — circumstantial evidence. We'll find the druggist who sold Olivia the stuff if we have to hire a hundred private detectives . . ."

Captain Crane's hand touched her elbow with authority. "Ready, Mrs. Jason . . . ?"

Every time Letty raised her eyes from the concrete floor to the stone wall, the striped shadow of the barred window had moved a few more inches with the movement of the sun. The universe wasn't running down — it

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was running away, racing, tearing, skidding down the slope toward the abyss without a hand to stay the throttle. The world wouldn't end in universal lethargy — it would end in a cosmic crash of blast and flame. Soon the friction of this terrific speed must generate fire and the whole dizzy maze of spinning suns and planets would explode in a giant shower of sparks and cinders. Minutes were seconds, hours were minutes. Days and nights whirled by in a blur of stripes — the flicker of a picket fence seen from the window of an express train. She felt the rush of wind against her face, heard the roar of speed in her ears, faster, faster, faster . . . Impressions were a jumble of flashes, scattered and incoherent as a montage of films.

The day the lawyer came. A core of callousness sheathed in a skin of synthetic sympathy, smooth and cold. "Just one question, Mrs. Jason. Did you buy that patent eye medicine from the druggist, Mather? The whole case is going to turn on that point."

Blood drained from her face. Her swollen heart labored to expel the overload. She began to tremble — lips, hands, knees. Why did he ask? Did he know the truth?

"No," she whispered. "Oh, no."

Bleak eyes were looking at her, without sympathy, without hope. "Mather's story is . . . circumstantial. Just what did you do that afternoon of June 21st? Remember?"

"How can I?" Letty looked blank. "That was eight months ago."

The lawyer's mouth thinned to a harder line. "Mrs. Jason, your life depends on this. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me, frankly and in confidence, are you protecting anyone?"

"No. Please don't question me any more. Please."

In his eyes she saw a new-born idea quicken to life and grow. His lips scarcely moved. Perhaps he did not realize he had spoken his thought aloud. But she caught the words. And the look of weary contempt. "You did buy it, didn't you?"

She was nauseated by the giddy pace of time. Weeks wheeled by as swiftly as days. Yet she knew this was illusion. The whole elaborate sequence of events was doubtless taking place between two breaths drawn as she lay asleep in her own white bed in her own blue and white bedroom with the maple leaves rustling beyond the window. Hadn't it been proved that a dream involving weeks of time and a vast variety of incident could unreel its whole length in the single instant between the ringing of an alarm clock and the waking of the dreamer?

Ralph came the day before the trial. Looking in his face was like looking in the mirror her cell lacked for fear she would break it and use the splinters to slash throat or wrist. His look of thin, bloodless skin, stretched taut over unfleshed bone, must be her own look after these weeks of strain.

"We haven't been able to trace the purchase of atropine to Olivia," he

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said soberly. "She must have got it somewhere. I've a dozen private detectives working on it. They'll turn up something before it's too late."

"Suppose they don't." Her quiet voice seemed to startle him. Had he never really considered that possibility until now?

He glanced toward the guard and dropped his voice. "Then . . . we'll have to tell the truth."

She whispered. "Is there no other way?"

"It won't be too bad," he argued. "I had a perfectly good reason for asking you to buy those eyedrops for me. The chief point against you is the fact that you bought the drops when you didn't need atropine for your eyes. But I did need it. I've been using the drops for years. And I still do. As I told you before, we can always prove that by a medical examination of my eyes. It would be different if my eyes were normal like yours. But since I can prove that I have a mild case of chronic iritis they can't convict me on the case as it stands."

"They couldn't convict," said Letty. "But they would suspect. That's why I agreed to keep still about the eyedrops when Olivia poisoned herself with the same drug you use for your eyes. Once they knew about that, they would look for other evidence against you."

"They could look till doomsday. They wouldn't find a thing."

"If only there were some other way I could clear myself without involving you. The druggist who sold atropine to Olivia must exist. She couldn't walk far. She must have got the stuff in this neighborhood somehow . . . Or could she have used an old phial of your eyedrops?"

"She couldn't. There was never any left over. And I always carried the current phial in my pocket."

"Ralph, why did Olivia choose atropine?"

"What do you mean?"

Letty mused aloud. "Atropine . . . The name comes from Atropos. Wasn't she the one among the Three Fates who snipped the thread of life with her shears? An oddly feminine figure for Death, almost domestic. The neat, industrious seamstress . . . the spinster, cutting what she had spun. Olivia was feminine, domestic. She loved to sew. And you know she hated you. Because you were driving the car when it crashed and she was crippled . . . Do you suppose she chose that particular drug as her poison deliberately because she knew that it was the drug you used for your eyes?"

"What good would that do her?"

"She hoped that you would be prosecuted for her murder."

"Letty! Do you really think that Olivia would kill herself simply to make me suffer?"

"She hadn't much to live for. Lameness, pain . . ."

"What if she did? We can't prove it now. And, damn it, she must have got the stuff somewhere! If only we had more time to trace her move-

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ments on that day before her death when she went out alone . . ."

Letty drew a deep breath, nerving herself for the sacrifice it was so plain he expected. "Don't tell the lawyer . . . yet."

"You're quite sure you can wait? A little longer?"

"Let's leave the truth till the last moment. We'll always have it to fall back upon, if worst comes to worst . . . Isn't there anyone else who might have poisoned Olivia? You told me once she was on bad terms with a servant . . ."

Ralph dismissed this. "Hardly a motive for murder. What made you think of such a thing?"

"The fact that you haven't been able to trace the purchase of atropine to Olivia, with all these men working on that one point. Could it mean that she never bought the stuff at all? That someone else, we haven't even suspected poisoned her."

"She saw so few people," muttered Ralph. "Her doctor . . . her lawyer . . . and her servant . . . It doesn't seem possible . . ."

Letty's nightmares were always wintry and twilit. So she was not surprised to find the vast courtroom bathed in a melancholy, grey dusk on each day of the trial. The judge, high on his bench, was one of the archetypes characteristic of dreams. Saturn as El Greco painted him — senile and vicious, the old man of the tribe devouring his own children. Bloodshot eyes, bloodless lips, papery skin — he looked the enemy of everything that changed and therefore the enemy of life itself, the delegate of death.

But when Letty turned her eyes the other way she found no comfort. Merely tier upon tier of heads, blank and yellowish as gourds, in the shadowless light, almost as misshapen, quite as empty. Only the eyes were alive — watching her.

Like mechanical dolls the witnesses shuttled on and off the stand. Press a spring and each could squeak a few thin, metallic words. People whom Letty had hardly noticed as human beings were now determining her fate — Olivia's cook, Olivia's doctor and lawyer, Olivia's milkman and grocer, the little druggist, Mather.

Yes, I was the first Mrs. Jason's cook. Tongue like a serpent she had. I told her what I thought of her when she fired me. Nagging, selfish, old thing. I didn't care if she was a cripple. I always pitied her poor husband. Yes, the second Mrs. Jason — Miss Knowles as she was then — used to come through the kitchen from the tennis court when Mrs. Jason's luncheon tray was being set out on the table. Usually tea or a glass of milk and salad and a custard . . . Yes, Miss Knowles was always running in to see if Mrs. Jason wanted anything and Miss Knowles was often passing through the kitchen alone because I'd be answering the doorbell or the telephone. She'd pass me in the front hall. I remember two times she took the tray up to Mrs. Jason alone. Right before Mrs. Jason's death . . .

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Well, within a day or so . . .

Yes, I was the first Mrs. Jason's doctor . . . Yes, I think I may say her injuries affected her attitude toward Mr. Jason . . .

Yes, I was the first Mrs. Jason's lawyer. When they were first married she made a will leaving everything to Mr. Jason . . . About six thousand a year. She told me he had nothing of his own . . .

Yes, I'm a druggist. I prefer the word pharmacist. Mather is the name. Fred Mather . . . I'll explain how I can remember her buying the eyedrops after eight months. You see, I'd just set up in business for myself. New store and everything. I wanted trade, so I made a point of asking each woman customer for her name and address so I could send her folders and samples whenever I got in a new line of cosmetics. Mrs. Jason — Miss Knowles then — gave me her name and address. Seems funny now that she didn't think of giving a false name but, as Captain Crane said to me, all murderers make some slip somewhere or they'd never be caught . . .

Objection! . . . Sustained. Pray continue . . .

During the last eight months I've mailed several folders and other stuff to Miss Knowles. Then, when her marriage to this Mr. Jason was announced in the papers, I remembered her. And I remembered how I first saw her, that day she came in to buy eyedrops with atropine in them. And then I remembered reading about an inquest on an Olivia Jason who had died of atropine poisoning. Seemed sort of queer, taken altogether, so I went around to the nearest police station and told them about it. . . . Oh, yes, the bottle was clearly marked: *Poison — For External Use Only* . . . No, it's not very strong . . . A one-percent solution of atropine sulphate. The dose was clearly marked, too — *One or two drops in each eye every three hours* . . . Well, a twentieth of a grain is supposed to be the fatal dose and if you drank the whole bottle that's about what you'd get . . .

Letty could no longer distinguish words. Just a humming crescendo of accusation, exquisitely titillating to the participants. The hunt was up, the hounds were in full cry, all inhibitions against cruelty resolved by the rationale of punishment — the one thing that makes it possible for sadists to live comfortably in an organized society.

Now Ralph was on the stand. Letty could tell by the look of her own lawyer that Ralph's testimony had not helped. Somehow, for all his good intentions, the prosecutor had trapped him into several damaging admissions — the unhappiness of his first marriage and his utter failure to trace Olivia's purchase of atropine. But after all, how could he deny these things under oath when so many other witnesses had testified to them already?

Court is adjourned . . .

Letty faced her lawyer, again. His

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face was serious now and, for the first time, compassionate. As if he felt she were already judged and doomed. As if justice could do no more and the time for mercy had come.

"Mrs. Jason, if you know of anything further in your own defense, it must come out now. This is your last chance. So far everything has been against you."

"You mean — there's no hope of my being acquitted?"

"None whatever."

Letty expelled her breath in a great sigh. "As a last resort — call my husband to the stand again."

"Why?"

"You'll find out when you call him."

"That won't do, Mrs. Jason. I can't question him intelligently unless I know what I'm questioning him about. I'm surprised your husband hasn't come forward before now — if he knows anything that would clear you. Or did he advise you to wait till the last minute?"

"No, no. I advised him."

"Why?"

"I was afraid of . . ."

"Of what?"

"It's simple, really. Ralph and I were driving together that afternoon of June twenty-second, the day before Olivia killed herself. Ralph had to stop to fix the car — something wrong with the carburetor. I got out and strolled around. He asked me to stop in a drugstore and get this patent thing for him — the eyedrops. He has a tendency to chronic iritis. A medical examination of his eyes will prove it."

Her voice trailed off into silence as she saw the lawyer's expression. "You should have told me all this before. We should have had the medical examination made before the trial began. And an oculist to testify. Now there's no time, but the case is so desperate, we'll have to take a chance . . ."

It was very late now. The grey dusk was darker. Everything was dimmer. The old judge sat so still, his pallid face so expressionless, that Letty had the wild fancy he might have died there on the bench and no one had noticed the difference. All the other faces looked flat to her bemused eyes, as if they were painted on a backdrop to simulate spectators in a courtroom scene. The only, living face was Ralph's as he mounted the stand again. A model witness — serious, alert, choosing each word with sober deliberation — only — he wasn't saying the right things.

"I never asked Letty, my present wife, to buy patent eyedrops for me containing atropine. Not on June twenty-second — not on any other day . . . No, I have never used eyedrops containing atropine sulphate . . . No, there is nothing the matter with my eyes. I have never had iritis, acute or chronic. A medical examination will prove the truth of that statement, I believe."

Letty's lawyer stammered. "B-but — if I call your wife to the stand and she testifies that she remembers

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very clearly that . . ."

Before the prosecutor could object to this most irregular question, Ralph had slipped in an answer equally irregular but none the less effective. "I have known for some time that Letty was given to . . . exaggeration, but I did not believe her capable of . . . murder."

"Your honor, I protest that —"

"Oh, boy, has he put the rope around her neck! Where's that telephone?"

"My God, wasn't he supposed to be a witness for the defense?"

"Well, what would you do if you suddenly realized right on the witness stand that your second wife must have poisoned your first wife? The minute he knew she'd suggested that line of questioning to her lawyer, he knew she was guilty and counting on his pity or gallantry to back up her cock-and-bull story . . ."

The guard touched Letty's arm. She stood still, looking across a heaving sea of faces to Ralph's face, a little higher than the others — a face that looked suddenly cold, triumphant, and evil. No medical examination of his eyes was necessary for her. She knew he would not make this statement on the witness stand unless it could be proved. She had only had his word for the statement that the peculiar sea-green color of the iris in his eyes was the effect of iritis on eyes naturally blue. That was a symptom of the disease, she knew. But she also knew that some people are born with light green irises. There had been occasional inflammation, but that could be simulated . . . vinegar or pepper . . . She had seen him use eyedrops, but they were clear and colorless as water. They could have been water. She was no doctor. She couldn't tell by merely looking at his eyes whether he needed atropine drops or not. Until this moment she had not recalled hearing somewhere, at some time, that even the mildest case of iritis would leave the eyes dull as well as inflamed. Ralph's eyes had always been so jewel-bright . . .

It was not only her ignorance that make her vulnerable. It was also her trust in him. The one thing that had never occurred to her was to doubt his good faith, to ask for confirmation of any statement he made. No doubt he had counted on that. When had he first told her about his sick eyes? The day after the accident that crippled Olivia . . . Accident? Of course not. Ralph had inherited Olivia's six thousand a year as he would now inherit Letty's eight thousand. No wonder Olivia had hated him — crippled, helpless, suspecting the truth, hesitating to change her will until it was too late . . .

How did she know all this so surely? Perhaps in the inmost core of her being she had always known it and never admitted it even to herself. In her heart she had always known that he was a murderer and her own silent, unacknowledged complicity in his crime was a part of the mechanism that now condemned her to death.

She saw all this and more in one

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brilliant flash of realization. The events of her life were no longer in sequence but all spread out before her in one continuous pattern. Time had ceased to exist. She was seeing her whole life all at once as an entity with a shape of its own — the Long Body of the Hindus, the body that extends in the dimension of time as well as in the dimensions of space. It was all one piece, shaped from the beginning to the end where she now found herself, predetermined by a shy, lonely girlhood that was to make her in later life the easy prey of a plausible adventurer. She had wanted to be fooled because it was so pleasant to be fooled by Ralph. And now that pleasant fooling had brought her to the foot of the scaffold.

The horror that had lain waiting in ambush for her behind the symbolic curtain of her other nightmares was simply herself — her own life seen as an integral whole, the Long Body that few mortals can bear to look upon. For the truth about Ralph and Olivia was a part of that ultimate self which she had always suspected, and never admitted in the waking state. Which in other dreams she had masked with a symbolic curtain and fled by willing herself awake . . .

Wake . . .

She didn't have to bear this horror. There was one way she could escape from the whole thing — by waking. It didn't matter whether jury acquitted her or not. It didn't matter whether the judge condemned her or not. It didn't matter whether Ralph betrayed her or not. For this was only a dream. All these people — judge, jury, Ralph himself — were not real. They were only dream images in her own mind. Even the stone wall of the prison cell that felt so solid under her fingertips was a dream image, too, more intangible than a shadow. She had only to wake and everything would go on just as it had before . . .

She and Ralph would laugh about this dream tomorrow at breakfast. *Ralph, I had the most impossible nightmare last night. I dreamed that you had murdered Olivia and got me accused of the murder in your place by neatly providing me with means and opportunity beforehand. You even provided me with a motive — by marrying me. And then you repudiated me on the witness stand so cleverly that no one would think for a moment we had conspired together to kill her. As of course we hadn't. I was the dupe . . .* And Ralph would answer: *So that's what your subconscious mind really thinks of me! Or was it the mince pie and cheese we had for dinner?*

She gathered her powers of concentration together and looked steadily at the dream courtroom telling herself to wake, straining for that mental click that would wipe out all this ugliness and restore her to her own bedroom, cool and fresh from the night wind pouring through the open windows. In another moment the whole scene should begin to shimmer and crumple as if it were all painted on gauze that was about to

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waver and collapse . . .

But this time there was no wavering. Again the dream held. Even in the waking state her sense of external things had never been more vivid and detailed than it was at this moment. The nick in the prosecutor's front tooth, the bristle that sprung from a mole on the judge's chin casting a thread of shadow. And Ralph's supple features still twisted into a mask of shock and grief.

She could not bear to look that treachery in the face a moment longer. *You know it's only a dream! Wake up!*

Then the last veil fell. Truth stood before her, whole and hideous, the greatest horror all.

She was awake.

She had been awake all along. From that first moment of shock when she had seemed to be dozing before the fire in a dream and Ralph had brought two strangers into the living room, her tortured mind had sustained the illusion of a dream as a refuge from terror and disillusion. That was why she had not walked down a corridor toward a curtain in this nightmare, as she did in all the others.

Other people mistook a dream for reality while they were dreaming. She had mistaken reality for a dream while she was waking. Was it so strange when reality itself had so many dream qualities? Incoherence, illogic, injustice, relativity in the duration of time, inexhaustible fertility in the invention of character and incident, the haunting sense of uneasiness, the feeling of being swept on helplessly by an inexorable current from an unknown source to an unknown destination. All she had ever known of reality was its reflection in the mind. A dream was simply a less disciplined reflection of that same reality in that same mind. Easy enough to mistake one for the other.

But this was not a dream: this nightmare was life itself.

ABOUT THE STORY: *There is one technical aspect of Helen McCloy's "The Other Side of the Curtain" that has in it the seed of controversy. As you know now, the opening scene of the story takes place in the office of an anonymous doctor. Letty Jason tells the medical man, obviously a psychiatrist, that she has experienced a recurring dream for the last eight months. The interview between willing (no pun intended) psychiatrist and unwilling patient ends in a psychological stalemate, with Mrs. Jason leaving the office and the doctor dropping out of the story, never to reappear.*

We can't help thinking that many readers — perhaps, most readers — expected the doctor to come back into the story in the final courtroom scene and by some clever deduction prove Mrs. Jason's innocence. This would have made the psychiatrist, in effect, the detective. This would

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have provided the story with what is commonly called "a happy ending." And from a purely technical standpoint it would have given the story a frame — a beginning and ending, all of one piece, running round the story and enclosing it within carefully planned boundaries.

We talked it over with the author and she admitted that the role of the psychiatrist may not have been fully integrated. Yet she liked her deliberately "formless" method of relating the events leading up to the tragedy. Further, even if she agreed that the doctor should have returned to the story, she would not have been able to let him rescue Letty Jason. To Helen McCloy this story demanded an unhappy ending — of all the elements in the plot the final trap, inexorable and unavoidable, had to remain intact.

We are inclined to accept that basic conception: Letty Jason's dream should not have been a mere warning — it should emerge as reality. As the author herself said: "this was not a dream: this nightmare was life itself." But should a character so important as the psychiatrist be left dangling in nothingness? What do you think? As a reader, did you "pull" for the doctor to come back into the story and tie up the unraveled skein of events? Personally — and mind you, it is only our opinion — we wanted the doctor to reappear, to fight for the innocent victim; and even granting the author's inner compulsion to end the story unhappily, we would have preferred to see the doctor-detective fail rather than make no fight at all. Indeed, the psychiatrist's very failure to save Mrs. Jason would have intensified the tragic realism of life which Helen McCloy projects so effectively . . .

This story has another technical aspect which gave your Editor a literary shiver. All the time we were reading the story for the first time, we had an extraordinary feeling of familiarity — as if we had known the story long ago. And this feeling kept growing. Had we read the same story, or one of similar theme, elsewhere? We ransacked our memory, but could not recall ever reading a story based on the same central idea. We felt like those people who sometimes visit a city for the first time, walk into a strange street — one that they know they have never seen before — and yet are gripped with the certainty that they have been in that very spot before.

Then, suddenly, the answer flashed across our memory. We picked up a tattered manila envelope which we keep on a shelf next to our desk. The envelope is marked, in scrawling pencil: Ideas. In it are the notes and notions we get from time to time and which we jot down for possible future use — plot ideas, gimmicks, facets of characterization. We pulled out the heterogeneous slips of paper: letterheads, scraps of wrapping, corners torn from menus — whatever happened to be handy when the "idea" bolted out of the blue. We riffled through the tatterdemalion memos — and there it was! We had once thought of precisely the same plot idea that Helen Mc-

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Cloy used in "The Other Side of the Curtain"! Of course, we had never got round to developing it, and had we, everything would have turned out differently — the characters, the title, the events — everything but the basic conception. No wonder Helen McCloy's story seemed so familiar — she had anticipated us in actual performance!

This creative anticipation is not so rare as one might think. With thousands of writers constantly seeking new ideas, why shouldn't a writer in England, for example, hit on exactly the same plot device that another writer, in California, thinks of? Anthony Boucher once expressed it this way: he told your Editor that every time he picked up a new novel by Agatha Christie he was mortally afraid that she had beat him to the punch on one of his own pet ideas — Agatha Christie is that fertile. And as a matter of cold, hard fact, Mr. Boucher is right: twice in our own experience we have been anticipated by Miss Christie — once on an idea still in embryonic form and another time on a fundamental plot idea that we were actually working on!

All this is good: it not only puts writers on their mental toes but it compels them to make use of their ideas without long-drawn-out gestation. You can't be a sluggard or a dawdler in the detective-story business. Competition is too keen, and there are too many alert and ingenious brains at work. It is a sign of creative growth and creative vitality when a writer keeps showing his or her heels to other writers, even in the race for fresh ideas . . .

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Clarence Budington Kelland is one of the most prolific and successful writers of popular fiction in the entire history of American "slick" magazines. He has sold serials to periodicals like "Cosmopolitan" at prices that can only be termed fabulous. In his salad days he was a newspaper reporter and political editor; he has maintained his active interest in politics — indeed, he is now more deeply involved than ever, as proved by the fact that in 1942 Mr. Kelland was appointed executive and publicity director of the Republican National Committee. His career in fiction started in the juvenile field and for eight years, from 1907 to 1915, he was editor of "American Boy." Today his most memorable character is Scattergood Baines, the fat, resourceful Yankee promoter, who represents Mr. Kelland's "notion of what a true Vermonter is like." Scattergood Baines made his début in "The Saturday Evening Post," then quickly switched to "American" magazine, where his long, lusty life in print includes a full hundred short stories and a full-length novel.

The most typical example of Mr. Kelland's remarkable talent for writing popular fiction is perhaps his short story which served as the springboard for one of Hollywood's most appealing motion pictures — "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town," starring Gary Cooper and directed by Frank Capra.

Mr. Kelland's philosophy of what might be called mass literature is worthy of comment. "It may be that in the Scattergood Baines stories," writes Mr. Kelland, "there is little literary merit to the critical eye, but nevertheless I am content with them and even a little proud to have been the conduit through which they flowed. To satisfy the demanding eye of those who read alone to discover literary excellence is a fine thing; to satisfy the homely, decent emotions and to give pleasure to millions is also a splendid thing. To combine the two is a miracle. If I were compelled to choose between the two, being impotent to work miracles, I believe I would with deliberation choose the latter."

Now read the story which follows — "Alderman Tommy Drops In" — and decide for yourself to what extent Mr. Kelland's rare tilt at the windmill of detective technique illustrates his own literary credo . . .

ALDERMAN TOMMY DROPS IN

by CLARENCE BUDINGTON KELLAND

For all that John Meaney held a disagreeable job, he was a companionable fellow, and young Alderman Tommy Rouse used to drop in at his office in the basement of the county building for a late evening's

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chat. This office adjoined the morgue, for Meaney was county undertaker. He intended some day to run for coroner and then for sheriff — for in that city it seemed to be a law of natural progression to pass through that series of offices.

Naturally John was glad to receive Tommy, for the youthful alderman was rapidly becoming a political personage to be taken into consideration. Even Commissioner O'Brien, who was at the head of the city machine, and County Supervisor Mattison, who was all-powerful in the country districts, were commencing to trim their sails to Tommy's breeze.

Ted Plank, of the Press, was there when Tommy came in to take his casual chair.

"If we had another we could start a heart game," said Meaney. "Anything special, Alderman?"

"No," said Tommy. "Just dropped in. I like to drop in places."

Which was true. Tommy had erected what success already was his upon a foundation of dropping in. He made a profession of it. Knowing everybody in town well enough to drop in on him was Tommy's ambition, and, curiously, he was always welcome. Not on account of his conversation, for there wasn't much of that, nor was that little especially brilliant. But he was an expert listener, and he was genuinely interested in what he heard.

Presently the telephone rang and Meaney answered: "Where? Vineland Avenue and Nixon Street? Gosh! That's way out by Red River, ain't it? Oh, they fished it out of the crick, eh? Start right away."

He turned to Tommy and Ted Plank. "Got to take the ambulance out where the sun goes over the fence. Fished one out of the water. Nice night for a ride. Want to come along?"

"Sound like anything?" asked the reporter.

"Never can tell," Meaney replied. "The coroner's starting and I want to get there about the time he does. How about it?"

"Guess I'll come," said Tommy. "Know some folks out that way. May get a minute to drop in on 'em."

Meaney put a long wicker basket in the ambulance. Ted and Tommy crowded onto the seat with him and they sped westward.

A few minutes later they arrived at a point where the little river flowed through a rice marsh — a lonely spot with the twinkling lights of the city far behind them — and saw by the river's edge a little knot of people. There was a uniformed policeman, three boys, the adipose figure of the coroner with his clerk, and the well-set person of Detective Sergeant Banks from headquarters.

"Huh," grunted Ted Plank, "somethin' doin'."

They walked forward and greeted the officers who stood about a shapeless bundle half concealed by the reeds.

"What you got?" asked the reporter.

"Woman," said the coroner. "Kids after bullheads fished her out."

"Suicide?"

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"If she did," said Coroner Briggs, "she did a good job. Never heard of anybody hittin' themselves on the back of the head with a heavy blunt instrument."

"Gosh," exclaimed Ted, happy in an instant, for here was a story. Already he scented it. A murder is a murder — it may be a good murder or a bad murder according to newspaper standards, depending upon what attributes of mystery or grimness, of family, of whatnot it may contain.

"Can't hold an autopsy here," said Briggs. "Take her back and we'll do the job there."

"Identified?" asked Ted.

"No."

"How old?"

"I'd guess thirty."

"Please, oh, please," said Ted, "tell me she was beautiful."

"Not bad lookin', I'd say," said the coroner.

"That," said Ted, "is enough for a start. Coroner's a conservative judge of beauty. If he says she's not bad I bet she's a regular Clara Bow. Anything from you, Banks?"

"No," said the detective.

Tommy stood blinking at the sluggish current of the stream. "Floating or sunk?" he asked.

"Sunk," said Banks. "Six bricks in the bag."

"In a bag, eh?"

"Gunny sack."

Tommy turned away to the uniformed officer. "Found a house yet, Fred?" he asked.

"Nice little place on Jackson Street. The missus likes it fine."

"I'll drop around and see it some night," said Tommy, and climbed into the ambulance. Meaney and Ted Plank were already in place and the ride back to the county building commenced. When they arrived they found the coroner and Detective Banks and a county physician present.

"Work fast, boys," said Ted. "The paper goes to bed at two — and here's the rest of the gang." This was to three other newspaper men who arrived breathless and demanding to be told.

They sat about the office smoking impatiently while the coroner and doctor went about their business in the next room, from which they presently emerged.

"Talk quick, you birds," said Ted.

"She was about thirty," said the coroner.

"You guessed that once. What's her name? How was she killed? Any identifying marks?"

"She was struck on the head —"

"With a blunt instrument," interrupted Ted.

"What about her hands?" asked Alderman Tommy.

"Eh?"

"I mean," explained the young man, "did she do washings and have calluses and like that?"

"Her hands were small and very well kept. Soft. Nails taken care of by somebody that knew how."

"That's the boy, Tommy," said Ted. "How about clothes?"

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"Not a rag."

"There was this," said the detective and he exhibited to them a strip of wood perhaps five inches long by three quarters of an inch wide and rounded at the ends. "Loose in the bag it was."

"What is it?" Ted asked eagerly.

Tommy glanced at it and chuckled. "Tongue depressor," he said. "Hum."

"Exactly," said Banks. "Nobody has tongue depressors around loose but doctors. Must have tumbled into the bag in the general confusion."

"The hands," said Ted, "indicate she was a young society woman. Would you say that?"

"I'll do my best for you," the coroner said with a grin. "She might have been. About five feet four tall. Weighed a hundred and twenty, maybe. Blue eyes. Light brown hair, kind of curly."

"Birthmarks? Moles?"

"Nary," said the doctor.

"No record of missing women at headquarters," volunteered Beebe of the News.

"How long?" asked Tommy.

"I wouldn't say over twenty-four hours."

The reporters headed for the door but Tommy stopped them.

"I wasn't here," he said.

"O. K.," promised Beebe. "Night."

It was too late that night to attempt identification through routine channels; there was nothing specific upon which to act, and Tommy, knowing there could be no more of interest until the next day, said good night and went home.

In the middle of the next morning he walked unchallenged into the office of Chief of Detectives Pung. Captain Pung was an elderly man of distinctive appearance and vulgar speech. His fine head and carefully kept, pointed beard and intelligent eyes did not match his grammar or his inflections. One expected something cultured, almost scholarly from the possessor of such a brow, and was rather shocked at the vocabulary which issued from those finely molded lips.

"How be ye, Alderman?" he asked. "What's on your mind?"

"Just dropped in," said Tommy.

"Yeah? Well, set. The boys hain't dug up nothin' yit on this here woman-in-the-bag case." He mentioned in choice epithets his opinion of the case and of Detective Sergeant Banks who was in charge of it.

"Where's Banks?" asked Tommy.

Detective Banks was an imperturbable young man. His pleasant, round face with Irish blue eyes and ruddy cheeks under hair which had turned white prematurely, showed neither offense nor alarm.

"Hello, Tommy," he said.

"How many doctors," asked Tommy, "are building brick buildings?"

"Seven," said Banks.

"Any of 'em off color?"

"None we ever had to notice. I got six men out matchin' bricks this minute."

"You got bricks on the brain,"

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said the captain. "Makes my ear ache."

Presently the telephone rang and Banks answered. He listened briefly, said O. K. into the transmitter, and turned to the captain. "Riley's got his brick matched. New garage. Doc Marley Clarkson, corner of Vineland and Walters."

"Huh," snapped the captain.

"It's in the right neighborhood. Vineland runs right down to the crick," said Banks.

"Call Vineland Station and have him hauled in," the captain ordered. "We'll put him over the jumps."

It was close upon five o'clock when Tommy saw Precinct Detective Hawks make his way through the hall with a huge young man in tow. They went to Captain Pung's door and entered. Tommy followed in time to see the encounter.

"Doc Clarkson, eh?" growled the captain.

"That's my name. What's wanted?"

"Buildin' a garage? Buildin' a brick garage?"

"Who are you?" asked the big young man, not belligerently, almost placidly, one might say phlegmatically.

"You'll find that out soon enough. Brick garage, eh? I'm Chief of Detectives Pung, that's who. What'd you kill her for?"

The young doctor did not smile nor did he start. His broad, pleasant face remained imperturbable.

"Who'd I kill?" he asked.

"And sunk her in the river with a mess of your bricks," said the captain savagely. "We got it on you. You even left one of them tongue depressors of your'n in the sack."

"Is this," asked the big young man, "what a third degree is like? Did I autograph the tongue depressor?"

"We got you checked up. We know when she come to your office and what fur. We had our eye on you anyhow — doin' that kind of business."

"Do you smoke in here?" asked Doctor Clarkson.

"Take him and make him look at her," said the captain.

"I'll go along," said Tommy.

Tommy studied the imperturbable young doctor when he was confronted with the body of the woman he was accused of killing. There was nothing to see.

"Who was she?" asked the young doctor, and turned away as if he had no further interest in the matter.

"Back to headquarters," snapped the captain, and the little parade made its way through the streets to the detective bureau. The doctor took a chair uninvited and Tommy's eyes twinkled at the expression on Pung's face.

"You," said the doctor to Tommy, "look as if you might answer a question. What's it all about?"

"You read the papers," said Tommy.

"Oh, yes."

"That was the young woman who was found in the creek."

"I guessed that," said the doctor. "And I guess you don't know who she is, and I guess that my connection with it is a brick. I saw a brother

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snooping around the new garage with one in his hand — like a woman matching a piece of cloth at a bargain sale. So let's get down to cases. You lads are in a fog, so you pick on me, and there we are. When you're through I'll go home and doctor a few measles."

"Huh," snorted the captain.

"Don't you recognize her, Doctor?" asked Detective Banks more courteously.

"I wouldn't care to say offhand," replied the young man. "And that's that. Do I go to the bastille? If not, I'm running along."

"Not till I'm through with you," bellowed the captain, and Clarkson shrugged his shoulders resignedly, filled his pipe and commenced to smoke. Captain Pung did his best in his blustering way, and staged a minor sort of a third degree, but it carried the investigation no farther.

"I got a right to own bricks," said the doctor, "and it's your business to stop them from being swiped. I guess you better fish or cut bait, Captain. Jail or home? Which?"

"Go on home," said the captain, "but we'll have a man on you, mind."

"I guessed that," said the doctor. "Good afternoon."

He went out — not exactly nonchalantly, but certainly calmly.

"Cool cuss," said the captain. And then to Banks: "That's what your bricks got us. Swell lead, eh?"

"Maybe," said Banks.

That evening Tommy dropped in at the Vineland station for a chat with the lieutenant at the desk, and inspected the new horses at Engine House Fourteen; after which he rang Dr. Clarkson's doorbell. The doctor's office had just emptied itself and his office hours were over. He greeted Tommy with humorously lifted eyebrows.

"Just had the other fellow in to supper," he said. "Kind of a nice detective."

"I'm not a detective," said Tommy. "My name's Rouse, and I'm an alderman."

"Thought I recognized your face. Heard a lot about you. Where do you fit in?"

"Just thought I'd drop around," said Tommy. "Kind of wondered why you didn't identify that woman."

The doctor considered. "From what I heard around," he said presently, "you're pretty smart and you'd rather get folks out of trouble than into it."

"I kind of liked your looks," said Tommy. "That's why I came."

"Her name's Mrs. Whidden," said the doctor. "Janet Whidden. She was here a couple of times. Couldn't sleep. Here the day she must have been killed, according to the papers, so I wasn't anxious to identify."

"What time?"

"Around half past one or two."

"Lived where?"

"Hundred fourteen Vineland. Boarding house."

There was a pause while Tommy pondered; then he rubbed his nose and looked at Clarkson out of the

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corner of his eye. "Better tell me the rest of it, hadn't you?"

The office door opened a crack and a small voice asked: "May I come in?"

"Always, anywhere and for nothing," said Dr. Clarkson.

A tiny woman entered — tiny in comparison with her huge husband — and dainty and fair and rather prim to look at in spite of her yellow hair and violet eyes. She seemed not more than twenty, and one would have taken her for the sweet, clinging type without either brains or will for anything but her personal appearance.

"Is he a policeman, too?" she asked.

"This is Alderman Tommy Rouse, my dear. What do you think of him?"

Mrs. Clarkson regarded Tommy with what seemed to be the stare of a wax doll before she replied. Then she nodded her head twice emphatically.

"Trust him," she said.

"We've been married six weeks," said the doctor.

Tommy clucked sympathetically, but the lady would have none of that. She frowned as an expensive mechanical doll might frown. "None of that," she said. "I'm glad I married him before this came up. He's going to need somebody like me. She was a bad woman. I was sitting in my room when she came first, and I knew it."

"Oh, she was bad, eh?"

"Wicked," said Mrs. Clarkson. "Harmful to people. Tell him, my darling."

"Well," said the doctor, "she came here first for insomnia. Then in a couple of days she came back and demanded to be put on the payroll."

"Eh?" exclaimed Tommy.

"Yeah. You know it's fatal to a doctor if he gets talked about. Sensitive profession. Hippocratic oath and all that. If it gets whispered around that a doctor talks about his patients, or that he is not absolutely impersonal with his women patients, he's in the soup. Ruined and hung up to dry."

"Yes," said Tommy.

"So this woman told me she was going to start the whisper, and write a letter to my wife, too, saying I had been exceedingly personal on her first call." He grinned. "Imagine writing such a letter to *my* wife!" He turned to look at her proudly.

"I'd have made her eat it," said little Mrs. Clarkson sweetly.

"So," went on the doctor, "she said she would go on the payroll for ten dollars each and every week until death do us part."

"Only ten dollars!" exclaimed Tommy.

"Queer, wasn't it? She didn't come so expensive."

"And what did you tell her?"

"I told her," said the imperturbable young man in his most imperturbable manner, "that she'd better go home and be nice, because if my wife got a letter, or if she started any whispers, I would look her up very promptly and kill her as dead as a herring."

"And he meant it, too," said Mrs. Clarkson, "and the woman knew he did, and it scared her."

"When was she here last?" Tommy asked.

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"The afternoon of the day she must have been killed."

"Doctor," said Tommy, "it looks as if you were in a fix."

"I'll be arrested?" asked the doctor.

"When the police run this down — as they're pretty sure to do — I think you will."

"Aren't you going to tell them?"

"Don't be silly," said Mrs. Clarkson to her husband. "Of course he won't."

"I won't need to," said Tommy. "Well, I better be getting along."

"Good night," said Mrs. Clarkson, "and come again."

"Most likely I will," said Tommy.

It was early for him, so he took a street car down town and went to headquarters, where he found Sergeant Banks in a little flurry of elation.

"I've got her identified," he told Tommy.

"As who?"

"A Mrs. Janet Whidden. Lived in a boarding house on Vineland Street."

"How'd you run her down?"

"Figured she lived around there. Guessed it must be a boarding house. No worried husband or relatives. The rest was just plugging. Calling at boarding houses till I found the one. Nineteenth place was it. Landlady said she hadn't been alarmed because the woman often went away for days at a time without a word. Kind of mysterious woman."

"Where's Camera Eye?" asked Tommy.

"Playing dominoes with the night super."

"See if Meaney's around the morgue. I'd kind of like Camera Eye to look her over."

Camera Eye Higgins was a detective lieutenant with a remarkable faculty for identifying criminals by rogues' gallery photographs. There are half a dozen such men in the country, famous in police circles. Perhaps their faculty is as much instinct as memory, but the fact remains that they can look at one of those double-barreled photographs which police departments circularize — full face and profile — and then, maybe in ten years, recognize the original walking along the street.

"Meaney's there," said Banks.

"Tell him we'll be right over. Let's get Camera Eye."

They routed Higgins from his game of dominoes and dragged him reluctantly away. They tramped over to the county building and Meaney took them into the morgue.

"Got her," Higgins said presently.

"What?" exclaimed Banks.

"Sure. Gertie the Badger. Used to work the Badger Game around Pittsburgh about seven-eight years ago. With a feller named Prouty. White-Vest Prouty was his moniker. Let's git out. I got a quarter on that game with the super."

Once in the detective bureau again Banks turned to Tommy. "What's the idea?" he asked. "What d'you know? Why'd you think of Camera Eye?"

"Thought it might be a good notion," said Tommy.

"It was," said Banks, "but what made you think of it?"

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"Ten dollars a week," said Tommy rather cryptically. "She was satisfied with ten a week. Couldn't figure that out for a minute, but then it came to me that a lot of tens a week count up. And it was kind of cool and efficient — and professional."

"What was?"

"Everything," said Tommy. "Now you go out and see how many doctors been paying blackmail to her."

"Gosh!" exclaimed the detective.

"G'night," said Tommy.

Detective Banks stared after him with a look between admiration and fury.

It was mid-afternoon next day when Tommy dropped in at the boarding house where Janet Whidden had lived, and was shown by the landlady to the dead woman's room. When he was left alone he sat in a chair and stared about him. His eyes rested on a couple of paper-covered novels — which might have been expected to be present. They lay upon a somewhat decrepit golden-oak table. From between the pages of one protruded an end of paper and Tommy walked across to see what it might be.

Its nature rather surprised Tommy, for it was a page torn from the catalog of a manufacturer of wax-works. He turned it over in his long fingers and wondered how such a page came into Mrs. Whidden's possession. Then he thrust it into his pocket. Presently he pulled out the drawer of the table and scrutinized its contents. There was nothing. There was nothing anywhere — which, thought Tommy, was as it should be. If he were right in his surmises concerning Janet Whidden her room would contain few records of her life or dealings.

When he was through he walked down Vineland Avenue toward the heart of the city, but his progress was not rapid. He stopped to chat for a moment with Patrolman Williams, who was ringing in at a box on the corner; he encountered Doc Keegan, tall and cadaverous in his silk hat, as that eminent medical man stepped out of the door which led upward to the offices of Keegan and Kitteridge and their medical museum for men only. They passed the time of day. Then he met Precinct Detective Jacobs, to whom he chatted for five minutes before he asked that officer to do an errand for him.

"I'm going to headquarters," he said. "Call me there and tell me."

In the detective bureau Captain Pung was in conversation with Detective Sergeant Pease when Tommy arrived, and looked up with habitual grimness as the young alderman entered the room.

"Well," he said, "we're going to make the pinch."

"Doc Clarkson?" asked Tommy.

"Him. We got it on him. It seems this Whidden woman was takin' it off the doctors."

"Yeah?" asked Tommy.

"We got a strong line on her. Well, the afternoon she was killed she went to Clarkson's. Mentioned it to her landlady. That's the last seen of her.

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Now, my theory is she was blackmailin' Clarkson and he had had enough of it, see?"

"Good theory," said Tommy.

"Banks is goin' out to run him in."

"Any hurry?" asked Tommy. "Guess I'll go along, but I want to get a telephone message first and send a wire to Pittsburgh. Clarkson won't get away. Maybe an hour or so."

"He won't git away," said the captain. "We got a man on him."

"Sure," said Tommy. "Smoke?"

"What's the idee?"

"Nothin' much, Cap'n. Just want to see the pinch. Yeah. There's the telephone."

"For you," said Banks, who answered the ring.

Tommy placed the receiver to his ear. "Yeah," he said. "Five years, eh? Before that, where? Pittsburgh, eh? Sure? Much obliged, Jacobs. Say, who's the other fellow? Never saw him? Imaginary, eh? Maybe so. G'-by."

He turned to the captain. "Goin' up to the super's office. Can you wait?"

"No harm, I guess."

So Tommy climbed the stairs to find the superintendent absent, which was perfectly satisfactory so long as the sergeant who acted as secretary was in.

"Hello Jim," said Tommy. "Want to send a wire to Pittsburgh in the super's name. To the department there. Have 'em rush an answer."

Then Tommy sat down and considered matters connected with the Clarkson case, and considered them with grim attention and tenacity. He had an hour for this exercise before a long telegram was delivered which Tommy read slowly and pocketed. "Much obliged, Jim," he said, and retraced his steps to the detective bureau.

"All ready," he said to Banks.

They got out a department car and drove westward in silence. Presently they stopped before Dr. Clarkson's office and alighted. Banks rang the bell and the doctor answered in person.

"We come to take you to headquarters," said Banks.

"I'll tell my wife," said the doctor imperturbably.

"Bring her along," said Tommy, and the doctor looked at him oddly.

"She thought I could trust you," said Clarkson.

"Ask her what she thinks now," said Tommy, but that question was unnecessary, for little Mrs. Clarkson appeared at her husband's side.

"I still think so," she said gravely. "Wait till I get my hat."

In the car the doctor sat beside the detective while Tommy sat with Mrs. Clarkson in the back seat.

"Banks," said Tommy suddenly, "stop here."

"Where? What's the matter?"

"Under the sign," said Tommy. "We're all going upstairs."

"Say, listen here, Alderman," expostulated the detective.

"Rather be a lieutenant than a sergeant?" asked Tommy. "If you would I guess you better drop in here with me. And fetch the doc and his

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wife along."

Mrs. Clarkson lifted her baby violet eyes to the big sign which covered the upper half of the building and then nodded her head emphatically. "I knew I could trust you," she said. "I never did like advertising doctors."

"With waxwork museums," said Tommy. "Nasty business. Nasty men do nasty business. How about it, Sergeant?"

"Don't get me in trouble," said Banks, but all the same he followed with his prisoner as Tommy opened the door and escorted Mrs. Clarkson up the stairs to the office of Keegan and Kitteridge, who cured by mail when the patient could not arrange to come to the office.

"Do it quick," said Tommy to Banks. "Surprise him. Arrest him for the murder of Janet Whidden. I mean Doc Keegan."

"What? Why?" demanded Banks.

"Because he did it," said Tommy. "And then see what happens. I like surprises. They startle folks."

Banks shook his head dubiously, but, as the door opened to disclose the tall, spare frame of Dr. Keegan the detective stepped forward.

"Doctor," he said harshly, "I arrest you for the murder of Janet Whidden."

"Know as Gertie the Badger," added Tommy. "But not known so well as Dr. Kitteridge of the firm of Keegan and Kitteridge, eh?"

Keegan, suddenly pasty-faced, backed away and tried to close the door in their faces, but Banks' foot was much too efficient for that, and the handcuffs were on Keegan's wrists before he could make a second movement.

"I didn't," Keegan expostulated. "I never saw the woman. I don't know such a woman."

"Good," said Tommy, "then you'll produce Kitteridge. Lots of folks have been wondering about Kitteridge. No good, Doc. It was twenty minutes past nine of the sixteenth when you carried her out in a sack. Patrolman on the beat saw the sack and you. Thought it was somethin' out of your museum. Then you stopped a minute at Clarkson's new garage and got six bricks for sinkers, and then you drove to the creek." He turned to Banks. "Kind of a partnership quarrel," he explained. "Should have stayed in Pittsburgh, Doc. But Gertie couldn't very well, eh? And Janet Whidden graduated as a nurse before she took up the badger game and went in for retail blackmail on the side with Keegan here. Just what was the quarrel, Doc? I bet she was hard to get along with, eh?"

"She — she was a devil," said Keegan through his teeth. "She drove me to it. I couldn't stand any more."

"I bet you," agreed Tommy. His eyes roved about the office, stopped a moment on the door which led into the museum, and moved on to the desk on which stood a ball of glass whose business it was to be a paper weight. "So you hit her with the glass ball, eh?"

"She bled me, and I couldn't get rid of her. She was a bloodsucker,"

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Keegan said hoarsely.

"D'ye know, Doc, I think you might have gotten away with it if she hadn't meddled with the business here. Helped you pick out wax figures for the museum and all like that, didn't she? You'd be surprised how surprised I was when I found a piece of waxworks catalog in her room. Yeah, until I walked past and saw your sign so handy. Maybe you'd have been all right if it hadn't been for that. So I asked around and the patrolman happened to see you lug down that gunny sack on the night you killed her."

Keegan shrugged his shoulders. "This won't be any worse than going on like I was before," he said hoarsely. "I'm glad I did it."

"When I got a report from the Pittsburgh police about you and Gertie, why, I felt pretty well convinced," said Tommy. "Some of the police sort of had an idea Doc Clarkson did it. On account of those bricks and one thing and another. But he didn't look to me like a man that would." He turned to Detective Banks. "Got it all clear, Sergeant?" he asked. "Here's the piece of catalog. Patrolman Williams and Detective Jacobs have a lot of facts they didn't know they had. So go on down to headquarters and give Cap'n Pung a surprise party. He'll enjoy it."

"Aren't you coming?"

"Guess not. I'm not in this at all. But I'll give the story to the newspaper boys. Yeah. Ought to get you graded up to lieutenant."

Banks stared at him. "Lots of times I don't get you — quite," he said. "But much obliged."

"Welcome," said Tommy. "I'll walk home with the Clarksons. Doc Keegan, that big sign was bad luck to you. Advertisin' doctor! Mean business. If you hadn't advertised with that big sign I bet I never would 'a' thought of you."

The Clarksons were silent as they turned up the street toward their home, and Tommy had nothing to say. It was not until they reached the steps that the doctor said huskily: "I was in a bad hole. I don't know how to thank you. I don't see how you ever figured it out."

Tommy glanced down at Mrs. Clarkson, who smiled at him but said nothing.

"Just luck," said Tommy. "If I hadn't dropped in to that woman's room I wouldn't have found that waxwork catalog; and if I hadn't dropped around to chat with folks, and met Keegan under his sign, and all, and kind of put two and two together it would have been pretty tough. But it come out pretty good, didn't it?"

"Come in, Alderman. I'll stir around and get us some supper," said Mrs. Clarkson.

"Not tonight," said Tommy.

She smiled up at him again, and the smile became a sort of impish grin.

"All right, then, Alderman," she said with suspicious gravity, "but you will drop in on us some time, won't you?"

"Apt to," said Tommy.

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Eric Ambler took the old-fashioned secret service novel and modernized it in the fullest meaning of the word. His A COFFIN FOR DIMITRIOS *is deservedly included in Howard Haycraft's list of detective story cornerstones. As Mr. Haycraft has said, Eric Ambler brought the spy-and-intrigue story to a legitimate marriage with detection — "though there is ample physical action, cerebration is for once as important as shooting."*

Even so magnificently informed a critic as Mr. Haycraft was unaware, however, that Eric Ambler once wrote a series of pure detective short stories — until they began to appear in EQMM. Indeed, your Editor was equally unaware of such a series until he met Mr. Ambler for the first time, talked shop, and was told by the author himself that such a series existed. The next step was, of course, a foregone conclusion: we promptly investigated Eric Ambler's literary past and lazarused (to coin a word) the six tales Mr. Ambler once wrote about that clever Czech refugee detective, Dr. Jan Czissar — "late Prague Police, at your service (click, click)!"

"Case of the Gentleman Poet" is the fourth in the series — which fact, by the application of simple arithmetic, conveys the good news that there are still two stories to come. All the tales reveal Mr. Ambler's subtle and intentional understatement: this adds to rather than detracts from the beautiful blend of straight English crime writing and unexpected Continental flavor which Mr. Ambler so expertly achieves by his economical and restrained style.

CASE OF THE GENTLEMAN POET

by ERIC AMBLER

IT WAS after the murderer of Felton Spenser had been tried and convicted that Assistant Commissioner Mercer finally became resigned to the occasional intrusions of Dr. Jan Czissar into the affairs of his department at New Scotland Yard.

For that reason alone, the case would be worth reporting. The conversion of an assistant commissioner of New Scotland Yard into an ordinary human being must be reckoned a major triumph of the power of reason over the force of habit. But the case has another claim to the interest of students of criminology in general and, in particular, of those who contemplate committing murders of their own. It demonstrated clearly that the first requisite for the committal of a perfect murder is the omniscience of a god.

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The world first heard of the death of Felton Spenser late one January evening.

A B.B.C. announcer said: "We regret to announce the death in London tonight of Mr. Felton Spenser, the poet. He was 53. Although Mr. Spenser was born in Manchester, the early years of his life were spent in the county of Flint, and it was in praise of the Flint countryside and scenery that much of his poetry was written. His first collection of poems, 'The Merciful Light,' was published in 1909. Mr. Marshall Grieve, the critic and a friend of Spenser's, said of him tonight: 'He was a man without enemies. His verse had a placid limpidity rarely met with nowadays and it flowed with the lyrical ease of his beloved Dee. Although of recent years his work has not received the attention which it has deserved, it remains an enduring monument to a man with many friends and an abiding love of nature.' "

It was left to the newspapers to disclose the fact that Felton Spenser had been found shot in his Bloomsbury apartment. His friend, Mr. Marshall Grieve, the author-critic, had reported finding him. There had been a revolver by his side, and it was said that Spenser had recently been suffering from fits of depression.

To Assistant Commissioner Mercer, Detective Inspector Denton ultimately brought further details.

Felton Spencer had lived in the top apartment of a converted house near Torrington Square. There were three other apartments below his. The ground floor was occupied by a dressmaker and her husband named Lobb. On the second floor lived Mr. Marshall Grieve. The third floor was unoccupied. The dead man's apartment consisted of two large rooms, used as bedroom and sitting-room, a smaller room used as a study, a kitchen and a bathroom. It had been in the sitting-room that his body had been found.

At about 6:30 that evening the sound of a shot had come from the top of the house. The dressmaker's husband, Mr. Lobb, who had just returned home, ran to the door of his apartment. At the same moment, Mr. Grieve, who had also heard the shot, had appeared at his door at the head of the first flight of stairs. They had gone up together to investigate.

After breaking down the door of Felton Spenser's apartment, they had found Spenser half sitting, half lying on the sofa, his arms extended and his hands turned back as though he had in the throes of death gripped the edge of the sofa. The body had been rendered rigid by the cadaveric spasm. The appearance of the wound, which was such as to have caused instantaneous death, suggested that when the shot had been fired the revolver had been within an inch or two of the head.

Grieve stated that Spenser had been suffering for some time from fits of intense depression. He knew of several possible causes. Spenser had been profoundly disappointed by the reception accorded to a book of his poems

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published a year before and had spoken bitterly of being neglected. He had also been in financial difficulties. He had never earned a living from his work and had lived on a small income left to him by his wife, who had died five years previously.

He had, however, Grieve believed, been speculating with his capital. He had also been a very generous man and had lent large sums of money to his friends. Grieve had seen him earlier in the day of his death. Spenser had then told him that his affairs were in a bad way, that he was very worried, and that he was seeing his solicitor the following day in an effort to salvage some of his losses.

This statement was confirmed by the solicitor in question. Shortly before 5 o'clock in the afternoon of the day on which Spenser had died, he had received a telephone call from Spenser who asked for an appointment for the following day. Spenser had seemed agitated in his manner on the telephone, but that fact had not at the time impressed the solicitor, as his client had always seemed to him to be a trifle neurotic.

The revolver, reported Denton, was an old pin-fire weapon of French manufacture, and unregistered. Spenser could have obtained it in a variety of ways. The same applied to the ammunition. Only one shot had been fired from the revolver. The markings on the bullet extracted from the dead man's head showed that it had come from that particular revolver. The only distinguishing feature about the weapon was a series of marks near the muzzle which suggested that at some time a silencer had been fitted to it. No silencer had been found in the apartment. According to the medical report, the wound showed every sign of having been self-inflicted.

There was, in Denton's opinion, only one curious thing about the case. That thing was the draft of an unfinished letter lying on the desk in the study. It was written in pencil and much corrected, as if the writer had been choosing his words very carefully. It began:

"As I told you yesterday, I was serious when I said that unless the money was repaid to me by today I would place the matter in the hands of my legal advisers. You have seen fit to ignore my offer. Accordingly I have consulted my solicitor. Need I say that I regret the necessity which forces me to take this step? I think not. Need I say that, if I could afford to overlook the whole unpleasant matter, I would do so eagerly? Again, I do not think so. In asking for the return of the money, I . . ."

There the letter stopped.

Mercer considered it. "Looks pretty straightforward to me," he said at last. "According to Grieve, he'd been in the habit of lending people money. It looks as though, having found himself hard pressed he was trying to get a little of it back. What does his bank account show?"

"Well, sir, he'd certainly got rid of some money. He'd bought some

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doubtful stock and lost a bit that way. Six months ago he drew out £500. Maybe that was this loan he was trying to get back. Funny idea, though, handing it out in cash. I couldn't find any note of who had it, either. By the look of his place, I should say he was the sort who lights his pipe with important papers. I suppose it's being a poet that does that for you. My wife's got a book called 'Pearls From the Lips of Poets' with one of his pieces in it. It's about a sunset and it's the kind that doesn't rhyme. I can't say I cared for it myself. A bit weird." He caught Mercer's eye. "But I thought that letter was a bit curious, sir. Why should he get up in the middle of writing a letter and shoot himself?"

Mercer pursed his lips. "Ever heard of impulse, Denton? That's how half the suicides happen. One minute a man's looking cheerful. The next minute he's killed himself. 'Suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed' is the formula. Any life insurance?"

"Not that we can trace, sir. There's a cousin in Flint who inherits. Executors are Grieve and the solicitor."

"Grieve's important. What sort of witness will he make?"

"Good, sir. He looks impressive."

"All right, Denton. I'll leave it to you."

And to Denton it was left — for the moment. It was not until the day before the inquest was due to be held that Dr. Czissar sent his card in to Mercer's office.

For once, Mercer's excuse that he was too busy to see Dr. Czissar was genuine. He was due at a conference with the commissioner and it was to Denton that he handed over the job of dealing with the refugee Czech detective.

Again and again during the subsequent conference Mercer wished that he had asked the doctor to wait and interviewed him himself. Since the first occasion on which Dr. Czissar had entered New Scotland Yard armed with a letter of introduction from an influential home office official, he had visited Mercer several times. And on every occasion he brought disaster with him — disaster in the shape of irrefutable proof that he, Dr. Czissar, could be right about a case when Mercer was wrong.

He tried to put Dr. Czissar out of his mind and concentrate on the business in hand; but he found his mind wandering from the larger questions of police administration to the smaller but more consuming questions raised by Dr. Czissar's visit. What did Dr. Czissar want to see him about this time? Could it be the Birmingham trouble? Surely not. The Soho stabbing? Scarcely. The Ferring business? Impossible. The questions continued. There was only one such question that Mercer did not ask himself: "Is it the Spenser suicide?" The idea did not enter into his head.

When at last he returned to his office, Denton was waiting for him, and the expression of exasperated resignation on Denton's face told him all he wanted to know about Dr. Czis-

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sar's visit. The worst had happened again. The only thing he could do now was to put as stony a face as possible on the impending humiliation. He set his teeth.

"Ah, Denton!" He bustled over to his desk. "Have you got rid of Dr. Czissar?"

Denton squared his shoulders. "No, sir," he said woodenly; "he's waiting downstairs to see you."

"But I told you to see him."

"I have seen him, sir. But when I heard what he had to say, I thought I'd better keep him here until you were free. It's about this Spenser business, sir. I'm afraid I've tripped up badly. It's murder."

"No question of opinion, I'm afraid. A clear case. He got hold of some of the evidence from that newspaper friend of his who lends him his pass. I've given him the rest. He saw through the whole thing at once. If I'd have had my gumption I'd have seen through it too. He's darn clever, that Czech."

Mercer choked down the words that rose to his lips. "All right," he said as calmly as he could. "you'd better bring Dr. Czissar up."

Dr. Czissar entered the room exactly as he had entered it so many times before — thousands of times, it seemed to Mercer. Inside the door, he clicked his heels, clapped his umbrella to his side as if it were a rifle, bowed, and announced loudly: "Dr. Jan Czissar. Late Prague police. At your service!"

Mercer said formally: "How do you do, doctor. Sit down. I hear that you have something to tell us about the Spenser case."

Dr. Czissar's pale face relaxed. His tall, plump body drooped into its accustomed position beneath the long drab raincoat. The brown, cowlike eyes beamed through the thick spectacles.

"You are busy. I do not wish to interrupt," he said apologetically. "It is a small matter."

"I understand that you think that Mr. Felton Spenser was murdered."

The mild eyes enlarged. "Oh, yes. That is what I think, Assistant Commissioner Mercer."

"And may I ask why, doctor?"

Dr. Czissar clared his throat and swallowed hard. "Cadaveric spasm," he declaimed as if he were addressing a group of students, "is a sudden tightening of the muscles of the body at the moment of death which produces a rigidity which remains until it is succeeded by the lesser rigidity of rigor mortis. The limbs of the dead person will thus remain in the positions in which they were immediately before death for some time. Cadaveric spasm occurs most frequently when the cause of death is accompanied by some violent disturbance of the nervous system such as would be produced by apoplexy or a shot through the head. In many cases of suicide by shooting through the head, the weapon is held so tightly by the cadaveric spasm in the dead hand that great force is required to remove it."

Mercer gave a twisted smile. "And

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although there was a cadaveric spasm, the revolver was found on the floor. Is that your point? I'm afraid, doctor, that we can't accept that as proof of murder. A cadaveric spasm may relax after quite a short time. The fact that the hand had not actually retained the weapon is not proof that it did not fire it. So . . ."

"Precisely," interrupted Dr. Czissar. "But that was not my point, assistant commissioner. According to the medical report, which the inspector has been good enough to tell me, the body was in a state of unrelaxed cadaveric spasm when it was examined an hour after it was discovered. The fingers of both hands were slightly crooked, and both hands were drawn backwards almost at right angles to the forearms. But let us think."

He drove one lank finger into his right temple. "Let us think about the effect of a cadaveric spasm. It locks the muscles in the position assumed immediately before death. Very well, then. Mr. Spenser's right hand immediately before his death was drawn backwards almost at right angles to the forearms. Also, the fingers of that hand were slightly crooked. It is not possible, Assistant Commissioner Mercer, to hold a revolver to the head and pull the trigger with the hand in that position. I contend, therefore, that Mr. Spenser did not inflict the wound himself.

Mercer looked sharply at Denton. "You saw the body before it was moved. Do you agree with this?"

"I am afraid I do, sir," said Denton.

Mercer contained himself with an effort. "And what did happen, doctor?"

"In the first place," Dr. said Czissar, "we have to consider the fact that on the evidence of the dressmaker no one left the house after Mr. Spenser was killed. Therefore, when the police arrived, the murderer was still there. Inspector Denton tells me also that the entire house, including the empty apartment on the second floor, was searched by the police. Therefore, the murderer was one of the three persons in the house at the time — the dressmaker, Mrs. Lobb, her husband, who returned home shortly before the shot was heard, and Mr. Grieve. But which?

"Mr. Lobb states that on hearing the shot, he ran to the door of his apartment and looked up the stairs where he saw Mr. Grieve appear at the door of his flat. They then went up together to the scene of the crime. If both these men are innocent and telling the truth, then there is an absurdity — for if neither of them shot Mr. Spenser, then Mrs. Lobb shot him, although she was downstairs at the time of the shot. It is not possible. Nor is it possible for either of the men to have shot him unless they are both lying. Another absurdity. We are faced with the conclusion that someone has been ingenious.

"How was the murder committed?" Dr. Czissar's eyes sought piteously for understanding. "How? There is only one clue in our possession. It is that a microscope examination of the

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revolver barrel showed Inspector Denton that at some time a silencer had been fitted to it. Yet no silencer is found in Mr. Spenser's apartment. We should not expect to find it, for the revolver probably belongs to the murderer. Perhaps the murderer has the silencer? I think so. For only then can we explain the fact that when a shot is heard, *none of the three possible suspects is in Mr. Spenser's room.*

"But," snapped Mercer, "if a silencer had been fitted, the shot would not have been heard. It was heard."

Dr. Czissar smiled sadly. "Precisely. Therefore, we must conclude that two shots were fired — one to kill Mr. Spenser, the other to be heard by the dressmaker's husband, Mr. Lobb."

"But only one shot had been fired from the revolver that killed Spenser."

"Oh, yes, assistant commissioner, that is true. But the murder was, I believe, committed with two revolvers. I believe that Mr. Grieve went to Mr. Spenser's apartment, armed with the revolver you found, at about six o'clock or perhaps earlier. There was a silencer fitted to the revolver, and when the opportunity came he shot Mr. Spenser through the head. He then removed the silencer, smudged the fingerprints on the revolver and left it by Mr. Spenser on the floor. He then returned to his own flat and hid the silencer. The next thing he did was to wait until Mr. Lobb returned home, take a second revolver, which may, I think, have been of the useless kind which is sold for frightening burglars, go up into the empty flat, and fire a second but blank shot.

"Mr. Lobb — he will be the most valuable witness for the prosecution — says in his evidence that, on hearing the shot, he ran to his door and saw Mr. Grieve coming out of his apartment. It sounds very quick of him, but I think it must have taken Mr. Lobb longer than he thinks. He would perhaps look at his wife, ask her what the noise was, and then go to his door. Yet even a few seconds would be plenty of time for Mr. Grieve to fire the shot in the empty flat, descend one short flight of stairs, and pretend to be coming out of his door to see what had caused the noise."

"I gathered that you had Grieve in mind," said Mercer grimly; "but may I remind you doctor, that this is all the purest supposition. Where is the proof? What was Grieve's motive?"

"The proof," said Dr. Czissar comfortably, "you will find in Mr. Grieve's flat — the silencer, the second revolver, and perhaps pin-fire ammunition. He will not have got rid of these things for fear of being seen doing so. Also I suggest that Mr. Lobb, the dressmaker's husband, be asked to sit in his room and listen to two shots — one fired in Mr. Spenser's room from the revolver that killed Mr. Spenser, the other, a blank shot, fired in the empty flat. You will find, I think, that he will swear that it was the second shot he heard. The two noises will be quite different.

"For the motive, I suggest that you consider Mr. Grieve's financial ar-

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rangements. Some months ago Mr. Spenser drew £500 in cash from his bank. There is no doubt, I think, that Mr. Grieve had it. While we were waiting for you, assistant commissioner, I suggested to the inspector that some information about Mr. Grieve's income would be helpful. Mr. Grieve, we find, earns a little money writing. He is also an undischarged bankrupt. He would, therefore, prefer to receive so large a sum in notes instead of by check. Also, we have only his word that Mr. Spenser lent money freely. I have no doubt that Mr. Grieve obtained the money to invest on Mr. Spenser's behalf, and that he took it for himself. Perhaps you will find some of it in his flat. Mr. Spenser had discovered the theft and threatened to expose him. The letter he was writing was to Mr. Grieve. But Mr. Grieve did not wait to receive it. He decided to kill Mr. Spenser. The fact that he had this old revolver and silencer no doubt suggested the method."

Dr. Czissar sighed and stood up. "So kind of you to receive me, Assistant Commissioner Mercer. So kind, inspector." He gave them a pale smile. "Good afternoon."

"One moment, doctor."

Mercer had risen to his feet. There was nothing left for him to say that would change the fact of his defeat and he knew it. The hope that Dr. Czissar would one day prove that he was no more infallible than other men had been deferred too often for him to derive any comfort from it. He did the only thing he could do under the circumstances.

"We're very much obliged to you, doctor," he said. "We'll always be glad of any help you can give us."

Dr. Czissar's pale face reddened. "You are too kind," he stammered. And then for once, his English deserted him. "It is to me a great . . ." he began, and then stopped. "It is for me . . ." he said again. He could get no further, and abandoned the attempt to do so. Crimson in the face, he clicked his heels at each of them in turn. "An honor," he said in a strangled voice.

Then he was gone. They heard the long, drab raincoat flapping hastily down the corridor.

NEXT MONTH . . .

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE will include two prize-winning stories:

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WELCOME TO A NEW WRITER

"The Perfect Crime" is the second story sold by a new writer, Kingsley Tufts. The author's letter to your Editor is so interesting that we have decided to quote from it at length. Mr. Tufts's first published fiction was "The Reel," purchased by "The Saturday Evening Post." (Not many tyros at the so-called happiest of professions make their début in the exclusive pages of SEP — Mr. Tufts broke into print with a vengeance!) "The Ladies' Home Journal" is running Mr. Tufts's poetry, and some of his earlier verse has appeared in "The New Yorker."

As the author informs us, all this didn't "just happen." In past years Mr. Tufts's poetry has appeared in "The American Mercury," "Esquire," "Coronet," and "Harper's" — some even as far back as in "The Literary Digest," which gives you an idea of Mr. Tufts's age. He is thirty-nine.

Mr. Tufts took his A.B. in Economics at Stanford University, practised as a Certified Public Accountant for several years in California and New York, and then returned to Stanford for his M.A. in Philosophy. (The world was so made that certain signs come before certain events, and events are indicating the slow emergence of Mr. Tufts as a writer.) After doing his Doctor's work at Harvard and the University of California, Mr. Tufts taught philosophy at the latter university, and about this time he discovered in himself the irresistible urge to write. He gave up teaching but before he could launch himself successfully as an author, the war descended on the world.

Turned down by the Army, he spent the war years in a shipyard at San Pedro, California, and when the war ended, he turned again to poetry and fiction. For many months his new career was conspicuous by its failure — and as always, heart-breakingly so. Now "things are beginning to happen," and Mr. Tufts hopes never to face a college class again. He says in his letter: "You can see why your editorial policy has given me both pleasure and encouragement."

Mr. Tufts's hobbies are sport fishing, chess, compounding the mysteries of chafing dishes, and writing a song now and then. Married? But good — for thirteen years to the gal who types his manuscripts and who had the hunch that "The Perfect Crime" should go to EQMM.

We welcome Kingsley Tufts with a full heart and with our best wishes — as we are happy to welcome every new writer who has what it takes. Patience and fortitude, passion and the willingness to work — and "things begin to happen" . . .

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THE PERFECT CRIME

by KINGSLEY TUFTS

Until he reached his fourteenth year, Poy Quon, in common with most Chinese boys of his age, had never killed anyone. Then deliberately, and with malice aforethought, he sought the life of one Sam Raczka, in Miss Adelaide Smith's eight o'clock algebra class in Room 6 of the Kayenta High School, Kayenta, California.

As Poy Quon pedaled his bicycle carefully along the edge of the highway in the morning fog, he watched the drops of moisture collect on the nickel-plated handlebars and on the small bell which he occasionally rang, more for the pleasant sound it made than for the slight warning it gave. His algebra book and his ancient history book were strapped with his notebook, his handball glove, and his lunch on the luggage carrier behind him. Folded in the pocket of his sports jacket was the day's theme for the English composition class; it was neatly written and was about the purchase of produce at the Los Angeles Wholesale Market where his father, Louis Quon, went in the early morning hours each day to fill his vegetable truck with the best and choicest. Because English Composition came at the Second Period, directly after the Algebra class, Poy Quon had taken particular care that the theme should be interesting and well punctuated.

He did not pedal rapidly because he had started for school in plenty of time. Unhurriedly, he reviewed the background, the provocation, and the mechanism which, in perhaps half an hour, would put an end to Sam Raczka. Poy Quon set the time in his mind at between ten minutes and fifteen minutes past eight o'clock. Later he would check it to the second by his wrist watch.

The events leading up to this morning had been cumulative in viciousness, starting in Grammar School at the time when the United States entered the war. All Orientals in California were then suspect, and the Quons had been no exception. Until the government segregation had been completed, Poy Quon's family had been mistaken for Japanese as often as they had been recognized as Chinese.

One day in the corner of the school yard Sam Raczka had beaten Poy Quon to his knees in front of the other boys, making him kiss the American flag and swear allegiance. Sam Raczka had been punished later, but not enough. He had resented the punishment, and he had continued to insist that Poy Quon was Japanese.

In the soccer games Poy Quon was

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precise and skillful, but Sam Raczka always managed to be on the other side — swift, noisy, and brutal. His knees and elbows found the places on Poy Quon's body that would double him up in agony.

When they graduated into High School together, Poy Quon had stood near the top of the class, and Sam Raczka at the bottom. Poy Quon was too light for football, but when the basketball season came, he made the second team. Sam Raczka carried his football tactics into the practice games against the second team, and more than once Poy Quon had been carried from the floor badly bruised or bleeding at the nose.

A week ago, in the gymnasium, Sam Raczka had thrown a handball with all his might, hitting Poy Quon behind the ear. Poy Quon had made a remark in Chinese and that evening, after school, he had found his bicycle tires slashed.

It was then that he had decided to kill Sam Raczka.

A few mornings later in Miss Smith's First Period Algebra class he had found the way, and as he studied the back of Sam Raczka's bull neck he had been glad that he had taken the misery dealt him without making an issue of it. Much of it had passed unnoticed by the other boys and while he had not meekly turned the other cheek, he had at least taken it with patience, avoiding contact with Raczka and his gang as much as possible.

Poy Quon had decided quietly that the world would be a better place without Sam Raczka.

Sitting at his desk in the Algebra class, the idea had come to him that if the frosted white bowl of the light fixture, directly above Sam Raczka, should fall from the high ceiling and strike Sam Raczka on the head, it would kill him.

Poy Quon knew that such bowls were held in place at the rim by three thumbscrews in the metal base. He knew that heat rises. He deduced that the metal base with the thumbscrews would heat up faster and expand faster than the large glass bowl. If these screws were loosened until they held the bowl barely by a hair, when the light was turned on the metal would heat up and expand, pushing the screws away from the glass rim. The bowl would fall from the high ceiling, and the chance that it would land on Sam Raczka's head was very good. If it landed squarely, it would kill him.

Last night there had been a meeting of the Wranglers' Debating Society to which Poy Quon belonged. During one of the debates in which he was not engaged he had slipped out, ostensibly to go to the lavatory. He had pulled on his rubber laboratory gloves and had taken the stepladder from the janitor's closet to Room 6. So he would not mark the floor, he had placed the legs of the ladder on four of his own books, which he got from his locker in the hall. By the light of his pocket flash he had climbed the ladder and del-

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icately, very delicately, loosened the screws. He was careful not to touch the bowl or disturb the dust on it, and when he had finished he blew softly until a little of the dust around the receptacle had settled on the thumbscrews he had touched. Then he brushed and returned his books to his locker, softly put the janitor's ladder back in the closet, and took off his rubber gloves. The heated debate was still going forward when he returned to the room, and he slipped back into his seat unnoticed.

As Poy Quon now coasted toward the school building, he was satisfied with the fact that he was not dealing with certainty, but with high probability. Sam Raczka might be absent today or not have his head in the right place. Somebody might turn on the light ahead of time. If so, an accident is only an accident.

But, he thought with relief, Miss Smith was a creature of habit. The class would be seated as usual, and she would come in precisely at eight o'clock, snap on the light switch at the door, say "Good morning," and go to her desk. First she would call the roll and then take up the questions they had encountered in their assigned homework.

Poy Quon parked his bicycle in the rack, locked the spokes, unstrapped his gear from the luggage rack, and strolled into the hall where he deposited his lunch and handball glove in his locker.

When the bell rang, he milled with the crowd and was pushed into Room 6. Sam Raczka was doing the pushing. Because of the fog outside, the room was darker than usual. Somebody lifted the curtains to the tops of the windows. The light was left to Miss Smith as usual. It was her entering gesture.

As she snapped the switch, Poy Quon glanced at his wrist-watch. Then at the back of Sam Raczka's neck. His head was over his notebook in a pretense of interest as he copied a problem from another paper. Poy Quon thought with satisfaction that this would probably be the last answer Sam Raczka would ever crib. At the most, ten more minutes; perhaps only five.

When Miss Smith finished the roll call and asked for questions on the homework, Poy Quon controlled an impulse to hold up his hand. A girl, Louise White, said she couldn't understand what was meant by an imaginary number. Miss Smith rose and wrote $\sqrt{-1}$ on the blackboard behind her.

Then it happened.

Poy Quon glanced at his wrist. Twelve minutes, thirty-nine seconds!

Sam Raczka had fallen from his seat. Glass lay shattered everywhere. The girls screamed and Miss Smith stood, half-turned from the blackboard, as if petrified. Blood flowed from the cut at the back of Sam Raczka's head.

"First Aid!" somebody cried.

"Doctor Mowry!" Miss Smith gasped. "Somebody get Doctor Mowry!"

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Half a dozen boys tore for the door.

Doctor Mowry came at a run. "Clear the room!" he instructed. "You — " he nodded to one of the boys as he knelt beside Raczka, "give me a hand here."

Poy Quon left the room with the others.

As he passed down the hall to wait for Miss Park's English Comp. class, he took the day's theme from his pocket. It was interesting and well punctuated, he knew, but at the same time it lacked that certain appreciation of specific detail, which Miss Parks would undoubtedly point to the class. He, Poy Quon, should be more observant.

During the Third Period it was announced in the Ancient History class that Sam Raczka had died without returning to consciousness.

It was the last Poy Quon heard of the matter. He contributed a quarter to the collection for flowers. He asked no questions.

"Q"

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *A. E. Martin was born in Adelaide, South Australia. At the age of eighteen he published his own weekly newspaper. At nineteen he promoted small-time prizefights. At twenty he owned and operated his own movie house. In a phrase, A. E. Martin has always been a worker. He left Australia and went to Europe where he drifted round all the Continental fair grounds, getting to know curious and unusual people, and when he returned to Australia he brought a shipload of them with him. That led naturally to his organizing his own circus. But there must be something restless in A. E. Martin. He believes with all his heart that no job should tire a person out. So he drifted again, always on the fringes of or deep in show business: he became publicity director for Fuller's, Australia's biggest vaudeville circuit, ballyhooing acts from Cooktown in North Queensland to Invercargill, the town nearest to the South Pole; he ran a motion picture trade paper; he joined J. C. Williamson, Ltd., Australia's leading legitimate theatre circuit and directed publicity for visiting stars including Pavlova; he returned to Europe as a booking agent and worked in London, Berlin, Paris, Nice, and Monte Carlo; he bought documentary films, took them to Australia, released them with considerable success, then switched to entrepreneuring a travel agency; he was despatching his third party of tourists to Europe when a paranoiac paperhanger named A. Hitler vented his spleen on the world. And all the time A. E. Martin kept writing, drawing on his personal experience with the strange and the bizarre. His first book published in America was* SINNERS NEVER DIE *(1944). This was followed by* THE OUTSIDERS *(1945) and* DEATH IN THE LIMELIGHT *(1946). And all the way from Roseville, New South Wales, Australia, Mr. Martin submitted a story to EQMM's Second Annual Contest — a prize-winning story about the people he knows so well . . .*

THE FLYING CORPSE

by A. E. MARTIN

"There must be some little thing wrong that's not quite right," my wife said.

I gave her a look, but she settled back in the front seat of the car and closed her eyes. "You go right ahead, dear, and fix it," she went on, snuggling deeper into the cushions. "After all, it's broken down in a nice spot."

I thought, if she were going to sleep and I, in my shirt sleeves, was to dig and delve into the disgusting entrails of the wretched bus, it didn't matter what sort of place the thing had chosen to break down in. Nevertheless, as I looked about me, I con-

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fessed that Mona was right.

So far as the motor road knew them we were on the crest of the Hummocks, a line of low, bare hills that provided the tail to the range that stretched Northward to God knows where. We had climbed no noble height, but at least we commanded a view, even if it was only one of flat land stretching in an immense green carpet to the shores of the distant gulf. It was one of those clear, crisp mornings when we should have been able to see ships a-sailing. But there were no ships. As far as I could see, between us and the gulf, there was nothing but grass and stunted bush, with no sign of habitation. Watching closely you could discern the lazy movement of inaudible waves as they curled in to make patterns in foam along the flat, deserted beach. Except for that there was no movement. For miles around the country appeared to be holding its breath, sluggish in the welcome warmth of a perfect winter's day. The sunshine was no more than a caress and twenty feet below the built-up highway, dew still glistened.

Lighting my pipe I scowled at the car.

Mona's voice came drowsily: "Unless you're going to make it work, Rodney, I think we should telephone Nell."

"Mona, my true love," I retorted, "there is no chance of telephoning your adorable sister." I added, malevolently, "Let the sausages wither."

"Oh, Nell wouldn't have sausages," Mona said.

I didn't pursue the subject but peered into the innards of the ailing Retallick. I am not mechanically minded. I am a physician, not a surgeon. I felt that whatever I did to the inside of the automobile would be wrong, and I prayed fervently for the approach of a car driven by one of those cool, efficient fellows who talk off-handedly of carburetors and sparkplugs as if they were mere thromboses or polypi.

"Have you got it going?" Mona asked, after I had, by rattling the spanner against this and that, awakened the echoes with some hearty industrial noises.

"No, I haven't," I said, shortly. "If only I had a hairpin. . ." I was well aware she never used them.

"I really think, Rodney, we should telephone," my wife said again.

"For the hundredth time, Mona," I cried, exasperated into exaggeration, "how can we telephone from the midst of nowhere?"

"Well, it seems quite unfair to Nellie," she retorted, as illogical as ever. "She's probably put her best bib on. We're hours late."

I wanted to say, "And whose fault is that?" but asked myself, "What's the use?" I'd wanted to start at eight. We could have been at my sister-in-law's country home comfortably by noon and settled down to the holiday we'd planned. But by the time Mona had been ready to start, it was ten. And there had been the delay at the gipsy camp. My wife had insisted on

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having her fortune told. It had been a little queer the way that paunchy Romany had looked at her and said, "So you've come back, eh? Looking for *more* bad luck?" Of course she'd never been there before, as he realized when she spoke. All the rigmarole about prospective offspring and halcyon days ahead had taken up the best part of an hour and now the effete Retallick had played up.

Opening her eyes, Mona said, "For goodness' sake, Rodney, make an effort. Hit a bolt or something."

"Do you realize, my girl, that tinkering with the unknown may have disastrous consequences?" I asked grimly. "Hit a bolt, indeed! Suppose it was the *right* bolt. The car might leap suddenly forward and hurtle into the depths with you in it. How'd you like to be shot off the highway? You'd be dead in a jiffy. Worse . . . your new hat crushed beyond recognition."

She patted the crazy thing affectionately and stepped out of the car, stretching her arms adorably.

"I know," I said, feeling better for the nearness of her, "I'll climb through the railing and hide below the level of the road. At the first sign of a car you'll proceed to fix your stocking. I've heard it's infallible. Every motorist stops dead in his tracks."

"And when he stops?"

"I shall leap out — I mean up — and render him unconscious with this spanner. We will then leap lightly into his car, push our own over the nearest precipice, and live happily ever after."

"It sounds enthralling," Mona said, "but haven't I heard crime doesn't pay? Seriously, Rod, we can't stay here and perish. I think we — I mean *you* should walk back and enquire at the hut we just passed."

"I saw no hut," I said.

"I suppose you had your eyes on the road and your thoughts on some other woman," she said, and led me round the bend and pointed. Sure enough there was a mud excrescence on the side of the drab hill and, emerging from it, a tall and very thin man who waved furiously. I waved back, glad of anyone who might perhaps deal with the refractory car.

We stood leaning on the road railing, looking down on him as he approached. He was not exactly prepossessing. Hatless, his hair fell untidily over an abnormally high brow. His eyes were too small for the swollen dome above, and his face narrowed to a weak chin and simpering mouth. As he climbed the steepish slope to the highway, I noticed the scrawniness of the wrists and saw that he was barefooted. Mentally I classified him as hydrocephalus.

"Anyhow," Mona said, sensing my thoughts, "he's wearing his best suit — even it it wasn't made for him."

He was on the highway at last, towering over us, his beady eyes focused on my wife. Putting his fingers beside his absurd mouth he shuffled like a shy schoolboy.

"My!" he giggled.

Mona smiled at him brazenly, and

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I coughed significantly.

"Oh, let the boy have his hour," she said, and like a mannequin, pirouetted. The stranger gazed spellbound; then said, mincingly:

"I'm going to see you tonight."

Mona stopped abruptly in the middle of a pose.

"Yes," he went on eagerly. "You're in the circus, aren't you? All night I been hearing the trucks go by."

Mona was too surprised to speak.

"That's what comes of wearing that hat," I grinned.

"It's a rare pretty hat," the stranger said and Mona wrinkled her nose at me.

The man was grubbing into the inside pocket of his ridiculously inadequate coat. "But most I like you without clothes," he said simply, and as Mona blinked, held out a printed paper. "Like that."

I glanced over my wife's shoulder. The paper had been torn from some cheap publication and the tall man pointed a crudely bandaged forefinger at a picture of a girl posing in tights. Before he carefully restored it to his pocket I had time to notice that there was certainly some resemblance to Mona. So far as the hut dweller was concerned there was no doubt at all. He said, like a child telling of promised pleasures, "*I'm* going to the circus tonight." He looked pensively at the automobile.

It was a chance in a million. "If you can make it go," I said, "we'll take you." I added mischievously, "You shall ride in the back with the lady."

"You shouldn't," Mona whispered as he walked across to the car. "It's not fair promising Mr. Simon . . ."

"Simon?"

"Sh-h" She nodded warningly toward the gangling creature who was poking an experimental finger into the belly of the Retallick.

"But how do you know it's Simon?"

She whispered. "Pieman . . . going to the fair. No money. Remember?"

I said, "If that poor devil can get the car going, I'll eat my hat."

And, surprisingly, at that moment the Retallick sprang to life.

"Oh-oh," Mona said. "I hope you're hungry." She reached up, and removing my hat, handed it to me.

"Well," I said, "your Mr. Simon deserves to ride beside his princess."

He stood, wiping greasy fingers on his newly-pressed pants, gazing into the interior of the car. With one foot on the running board he suddenly looked round. There was the strangest expression in his eyes. Suspicion was there, certainly, but something of fear too.

"We better see *him* first," he said.

"Him?"

"He's down there," he told us, pointing to the paddock below the road.

"Who?" I asked, and as he didn't reply, shook his sleeve. "What's he doing there?"

"I didn't go near," he said defensively. "I see him lying but I didn't go near. I called, but he didn't answer."

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"Better have a look-see," Mona counselled and began to scramble under the railing. I helped her down the slope. When we reached the bottom Simple Simon was standing motionless, pointing at a spot some thirty feet from the roadway above. We followed his gaze and Mona caught her breath.

In the thin grass was a naked man. Even at that distance, and it must have been a dozen yards at least, I knew he was dead.

The tall man suddenly began whimpering.

"When did you find him?" I asked.

He turned slowly, blinking. "Before I put on this new suit." He added eagerly, "But I haven't been near him. No closer'n this," and asked, "Who put him there?"

My eyes roamed the patches of grass and bare dampish earth surrounding the body. Then bidding them stay where they were, I walked forward gingerly. I knew the importance of footprints. The body was lying, face down, in a curiously humped position, almost as if it had been in the first stage of turning a somersault. The temple rested in an indentation in the soft earth but the head was twisted and part of the cheek and chin was visible.

I looked back to where Mona and the stranger were standing and could clearly distinguish the tracks I had made. Then my eyes carefully surveyed the area surrounding the corpse. There was not the slightest indentation. How then, I wondered, did the man come to be lying there, thirty feet from the road. Of course, I'd known at once the cause of death. There was a bullet hole behind his ear. I straightened, frowning, to find Mona beside me.

"Now, don't be fussy," she said. "Simon's run away to be sick." She looked down at the nude figure, ludicrous even in death, and made a little grimace.

"He's been shot," I told her. "See, the bullet went in there." I pointed to the hole behind the ear. "He was shot at very close quarters."

"And in the early morning," Mona said. "That's why he's undressed." She snapped her fingers. "I know. He was shot in the bath and dumped here. He must have shaved, finished his bath, and then got himself shot. It's a lesson, isn't it, always to lock your bathroom door and risk having a fainting fit?"

"O.K., Mrs. Sherlock Holmes," I said. "Now tell me something else. How did he get thirty feet from the highway? Peek around. You can see my footprints, can't you?" I raised my eyebrows. "Where are yours?"

"Oh," she said, "I was very clever about that. I tiptoed in your marks."

"Good for you," I said. "Now, do you see any other prints? Any indentations? Any wheel tracks? There isn't a sign. Then how did he get here?"

"Oh, you'll never make a detective," she said, calmly. "He was dropped, of course. Out of an airplane. He was murdered thousands of miles away and flown here."

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"But," I objected, "airplanes have to travel at a good bat to keep up. When he hit the ground wouldn't he roll or bounce or something? This man looks as if he'd just plopped!"

"I know," she said, "Balloon! They were coming down and when they threw him out the balloon hurtled up again."

"Balloons are extinct," I told her. "Anyway, it's not our worry. After all, my pet, you're not going to ride with Simple Simon. Whether he likes it or not he's got to stay here and watch the body."

As her sister embraced her, Mona said breathlessly, "Oh, Nell, we're so sorry we're late. We've seen a murder."

"Nothing of the sort," I said, cutting short further exaggerations. "We came across a dead man."

"A gipsy," Mona said. "He was disgustingly naked in the middle of nowhere."

"We know nothing about him," I said. "We don't know *who* he is or *what* he is. Now you two gossip about something else while I find the policeman."

"He'll be watching the circus," Nell advised. "Half the population has gone to see the tent go up." She added apologetically, "The circus is an event in this little town."

Sergeant Copestone was watching an elephant hauling on some gadget affixed to a pulley that lifted the soiled and sagging canvas and gave it the shape and substance and magic that is circus. He was frankly irritated when his attention was distracted from the unusual scene.

"Dead in a paddock, eh? Well it *would* have to happen today."

I explained about Simple Simon. "Oh, Daffy!" he said lightly. "Did *he* find him? Well, he's harmless. A half-wit and that's an exaggeration."

"He's at least a mechanic," I said.

"Daffy?" he scoffed. "A mechanic!"

"My car stalled. He made it go."

"I didn't think he'd ever ridden in one," Copestone chortled. "He must have had a lucky break." He looked at me keenly. "Did you say this chap was naked?"

"He wore less than Adam. And your Daffy had on a new suit — one that didn't fit."

"Don't tell me Daffy shot him just to get his clothes," Copestone grinned.

"In any case," I said, "how would he get the corpse to where we found it without leaving any tracks? There's no sign of anything."

"*You're* saying it," Copestone said. "I know the spot. He could have been emptied off the highway."

"No," I said, definitely, "He was too far from the road. I guess he was dropped from a plane."

Copestone groaned. "That means all sorts of blinking experts. Of course the stripping's to avoid identification. That won't help if it's a local lad, but if he was thrown from a plane he might have come from anywhere."

Well, he wasn't a local lad, and Cincotta, the circus proprietor, at

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the Sergeant's request, had a look at the body and said it was no one from his show. When I had a close-up with the local doctor I knew the man had died late the previous night, probably not more than an hour or so before he'd been dumped. He'd a number of injuries all consistent with a fall from a height, and for a moment I wondered if he could have come down in a parachute that had landed him none too gently. But, then, where was the parachute? I told Copestone I'd be in the town for two weeks and left him with his headache.

I'd been warned that tea would be served promptly at three-thirty and although I arrived on the dot, the girls were already taking theirs. Opposite them a young woman sat bolt upright, a cup held stiffly in her right hand. She gave me quite a shock because, as far as features went, she was the counterpart of Mona. She made as if to rise but Mona said:

"Don't move. It's only my brute of a husband." She turned to me. "This is M'lle. Valda from the circus," and left me to wonder while Nell served tea as if it were quite usual to have itinerant show-folk dropping in.

After some desultory conversation Mona said abruptly, "Rodney, you've got to give M'lle. Valda a certificate or something to say she can't perform tonight. She's had a great shock."

The circus woman attempted to wipe her eye with her free hand. I said, "I'm sorry to hear that." And with that the cup fell from M'lle. Valda's fingers and she burst into tears.

"There, there," Nell said, putting her arms about her. "You come to my room and rest."

When she had led the sobbing girl away I said: "Now what *is* all this? What's she doing here?"

"I met her at the chemist's," Mona explained. "The chemist introduced us . . . sort of. He said, 'Are you ladies sisters?' I remembered the picture poor silly Simon showed us and I knew who she was. I couldn't help being interested. When the chemist went away to mix something she'd ordered, she began to dab her eyes. I said, 'You're M'lle. Valda, aren't you? Can I help you?' I think she was just dying to talk to somebody. She broke down and on the spur of the moment, I invited her round for a cup of tea. I knew Nell wouldn't mind. And she told me all about it."

"And what was it all about?"

"Her boy friend has run away. He's not coming back."

"How does she know that?"

"He wrote her a letter. He wanted to be free."

"Nothing unusual in that," I said.

"Now you're being Dr. Smug," Mona said. "And, anyway, I'll bet my suspenders against your stethoscope that Valda's boy friend is the naked lad Simple Simon found in the paddock."

"Oh, that's just guessing," I said. "The circus boss saw the body. It's no one from the show."

"He might be lying."

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"Mona," I protested, "that's unreasonable. However, if you wish to satisfy your romantic little mind, why not ask the girl to describe her friend. You can then check with the corpse. Heaven knows you saw enough of him."

"I'll get it out of her," she promised. "He must have been a detestable man sending a letter like that."

"Oh, so you've seen the note?"

"He didn't actually write it," Mona said. "He got someone to do it. He can't write."

"Well, we *are* moving in nice company," I said, smugly. "Naked men dropping from the sky! Crying circus girls! Illiterate Casanovas!"

"Maybe writing isn't so important in a circus," Mona said. "Valda's friend is a bareback rider. I don't see that knowing how to write would help him to stick on."

Nell returned just then, looking a mite serious. "If Rod would like to assume his bedside manner he could visit the patient." She added in another tone, "You've only my word, but I fancy our visitor is going to have a baby."

"There!" Mona exploded. "What a beast of a man!"

Nell asked: "What man?"

"The jockey . . . the bareback rider. Saying in his letter 'I'm sick of you. You won't ever see me again.' He *must* have known about the baby. I bet he's some monkey-faced, undersized rat," she said, entirely forgetting that she'd previously identified him with the man in the paddock who had been slim and well-shaped and not bad-looking.

"He's nothing of the sort, Mona," Nell said, unexpectedly. "I've seen his picture. She asked me to get something from her bag and it was there. He's quite picturesque with the fiercest mustache and a tuft on his chin that might have come off Napoleon the Third."

"There!" I said. "That disposes of your idea about Valda's lover being the corpse in the copse."

"Anyway," Mona said, "he deserved to be murdered. Writing such a brutal letter!" She regarded me sternly. "If you were half a doctor," she said, "you wouldn't stand eating your head off while that poor child . . ."

"Oh, all right," I said, swallowing my cream cake. "I'll see the lady."

"And if it's what Nell thinks," my wife went on, "you've got to march over and tell the ringmaster she can't possibly perform tonight. I'm not going to have that girl bounding about on a slack-wire."

"Oh, she's a wire-walker?"

"I don't know," Mona admitted. "In the circus they do everything. She might even go in with the lion."

"Oh, go on in with the patient," Nell said, laughing, pushing me through the door.

I found it was true enough about the baby, but there'd be quite an interval before its birth. M'lle. Valda wept as she told me, "I don't want you to think I'm bad," she said. "You've all been so kind. You're not

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snobs. We were going to be married and now he's run away."

"He knew about the baby?"

She nodded.

I sighed. "I'll walk across and tell your boss you can't perform tonight."

She regarded me curiously. There was something in her expression I couldn't fathom. "You're a doctor," she said at length. "You know men — men who are going to have babies they think will be a tie. Do you think Joe will come back?"

I patted her hand. "In time, yes," I lied. "I feel sure of it. Don't you?"

"No," she said, "I don't think he'll ever come back."

On my way to the circus I met Sergeant Copestone. "They're round the body like bees," he told me. "It's got 'em guessing. The absence of tracks, I mean. Cincotta lent us a blacktracker who does a boomerang act in the circus but he couldn't pick up a damn thing. I think you're right, doc. He was dropped from a plane." He sighed prodigiously. "That's where the tax-payers' money goes. He could have been flown from anywhere in Australia and Australia's a damn big place. I hear the newspapers are playing it up. 'The Flying Corpse' or something."

I found Cincotta suave and swarthy —all teeth and sideburns. I imagined, in make-up, under arc lights, he'd look well in a dress-suit. Just now he was a little grimy in oil-smeared slacks and dirty pullover. I began with some politeness about intruding upon him at a busy time and with an African lion in a cage roaring in my ears, broached the subject of my visit.

"I've called to see you regarding M'lle. Valda," I said. "I have advised her to rest tonight. She is suffering from shock."

He shrugged. "She will get over it. They all do. Her man has run away."

"Oh, you know that?"

He shrugged again. "The girl, she rides him too hard. Joe Varella, he is never serious." He looked at me slyly. "Maybe something has happened?"

I ignored the implication. I certainly wasn't going to tell him about Valda's condition.

He went on: "Mister, if you knew Joe, you would understand. Two days ago he hands me his notice. I am not surprised. I am sorry but I understand. Joe!— he can pick up dames like that . . ." he snapped his fingers. "Why should he stick to one woman? She wants he should marry her, he tells me. Joe Varella marry? *pouf!*"

"You mean he gave up his job because Valda was pressing him to marry her?"

"Why not?" he asked. "Joe can get plenty jobs. Valda can get plenty men. But me? I am the poor mugg because Varella must have his fun and maybe carries the game too far. I lose a good rider the dames come twice to see in the two-night stands and now you want I should lose little Valda." He smiled, deprecatingly, showing all his teeth. "Well, mister, I still got that mangy lion and a good

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elephant. I should worry." He spat into the tanbark, then lit a cigarette without offering me one. "Where is she now?" he asked.

"Quite safe," I told him.

He grinned. "Wherever she is, she will not stay, my friend. She is circus. When she hears the band tonight she will come running. Tomorrow she forgets you. The day after she forgets Varella."

He bawled instructions to a man fixing some gear at the top of the tent, then turned to me apologetically.

"Excuse me," he said. "Plenty to do, you understand. Tell Valda she shall take it easy. I find her some simple act. Not too much jolt, eh?" He smirked, knowingly. "Later, maybe, she sells the tickets." He took my arm familiarly and steered me toward the entrance. "Don't worry too much, doc. Circus girls is tough."

"What exactly does Valda do?" I asked, but he was no longer interested. His eyes had gone to the tent top again and he directed such a spate of obscenity at the fellow perched there that I was glad to escape. I paused at the entrance, feeling for a cigarette, and heard a complaining circus hand: "Listen to him. I feel like turning the game in. There's no programs tonight. How does he think a man can live without side-lines?"

As I lit my cigarette a telegraph messenger thrust an envelope at me. "Mr. Cincotta?" I pointed to the ring. A moment later I heard Cincotta shout. "Doc!" He came hurrying, waving a telegram, then held it under my nose. "See! Joe, he is not such a bad fellow, eh?"

I read the message: "I admit nothing but give Valda ten pounds for me."

Cincotta said: "He has got a conscience, that fellow. I'll bet he's been worrying and this morning he sends the telegram." He tapped the paper. "See — from the city." He put the envelope in his pocket. "Poor Joe. He thinks maybe he'll have bad luck if he don't do the right thing. Very superstitious. D'you know, doc, that man is so superstitious he has a picture of some saint pasted in his watch-case so he can get protection any minute! Well," he clapped his hands, rubbing them together as if all were well with the world, "now I get Valda back tonight, sure. Ten pounds, eh? That makes everything okey-doke."

I was a little disgusted with Mr. Cincotta but had to admit he knew his people. At any rate M'lle. Valda refused Nell's invitation to remain for dinner. I impressed upon her the wisdom of resting and she promised to take it easy.

"And," Mona said, "you must on no account walk any wires or things."

Valda stood at the door looking back at us with that queer enigmatic expression. "She reminds me of someone," I said, when she had gone.

"It's me," Mona said, promptly.

I shook my head. "Not the face, the expression."

"Mona Lisa," Nell suggested and of course that was it.

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We assured ourselves we didn't want to see the circus. Distantly we could hear the band and noisy ballyhoo and occasionally the poor lion roared. The footsteps and excited chatter of people on their way to the show came to us clearly.

"I wish I knew what that girl is doing," Mona said. "I bet that brute of a circus man will make her go in with the animals."

"He promised she would do some simple act," I protested.

"Simple!" she cried. "What's simple about circus acts? Do you call swinging by your toes from a trapeze ninety miles high simple?" She eyed me sternly. "You ought to be there to forbid it."

"Which adds up to — you'd like to see the circus?" I said.

"It's all very well to be complacent," Mona said, "but I keep thinking of that poor lamb."

"All right," Nell said, good-naturedly. "Just to satisfy ourselves Valda isn't being cruelly exploited, we'll go."

Cincotta was standing near the entrance, a picturesque figure in his evening clothes. He flashed me a smile and I asked after Valda. He shrugged, characteristically. "My friend, I have done my best." He went on hurriedly, "But it is only a little act. Just looking pretty."

As we were hustled along the gangway by those following, Mona whispered, "Who was that?"

"Cincotta. Valda's boss," I told her.

"He looks every inch a white-slaver," she commented, and just then a megaphone voice announced the grand parade and we had only just reached our seats when the cavalcade entered.

When, later, Valda tripped into the ring Mona gasped and clutched my arm. "It's her," she said.

"Looking exactly like you, only in pink tights," I whispered.

"Oh, shut up," she said, her eyes on the ring. "Now, listen, Rodney, if she starts performing catherine wheels you must stop the show."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," I said. "Besides, she isn't going to perform catherine wheels."

Valda had advanced to the centre of the ring followed by Cincotta. The latter cupped his hand and into it she placed a pink-slippered foot. Her hands grasped a hanging rope and she began to climb. At the tent top she rested a moment on a trapeze and then, while Mona protested so audibly that even Nell shushed her, she began posing on the rope. Cincotta, from the ring below, pulled upon the end so that Valda, clinging now by her feet, now by her hands, swayed gently while a spotlight picked up her rounded figure and the band played "Dreaming."

Mona said: "It's ghastly. She'll be dashed to pieces."

It would be a nasty drop, I thought, but there was nothing harmful in the exercises themselves even if, sooner or later, she *was* going to have a baby.

When it was over and Valda had

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bowed herself out of the ring, Mona said indignantly: "And that's what that white-slaver calls a simple little act? Butchering her to make a Roman holiday! Making her swing in mid-air with a breaking heart!"

In bed that night Mona tossed and turned and suddenly was wide-awake, sitting up so abruptly that, startled, I switched on the light.

"I've just remembered," she said. "That fat gipsy mistook me for someone. He thought I was Valda. They'd prophesied misfortune for her."

"What of it?" I asked. "They were right for once. Her man's run away."

"Listen, Rodney," my wife said, "You can turn over and go to sleep in cold blood if you like, but there was something foreboding about that gipsy. There was death in his eye."

"You've been dreaming," I said.

"Anyway," she said, settling down, "tomorrow you're driving us to the gipsies' camp. I'm going to see what I can find out. It's high time Nell had her fortune told."

"Maybe Nell doesn't want to know her fate."

"Nonsense," Mona said. "Everyone should know their fate. How else can they guard against it?" And with that piece of logic ringing in my ears I fell asleep.

The gipsy camp looked deserted but when I hallooed, the paunchy Romany we had met previously appeared. He was flashily dressed with an opal tie-pin and several rings on fingers more bronzed by dirt than nature.

"Remember me?" Mona said, using the smile Nell calls male-bait.

"Could I forget, lady?" he responded, and Mona looked pleased.

She pointed to Nell. "This lady wants to cross your palm, but first I want to ask you something. Yesterday you mistook me for someone."

I fancied the man's eyes narrowed.

"You said," Mona went on, " 'Have you come back for more bad luck?' Please, I want to know. Did you prophesy something bad for the lady like me? I will pay, just as if you were telling her fortune again."

The gipsy smiled. "If someone else asked me," he said, "I would never tell. For you, it is different. You are so lovely." Mona cast down her eyes. "To you I say the woman is like you only in face. Her ways are dark ways. Her fate is a dark fate. For you there is love and happiness and children — let me see! How many?"

"Really, I think that will do, thank you very much," Mona said in a rush. "My husband's a doctor, you see," she added with seeming irrelevance. "Now you can tell my sister all about some tall dark man." She smiled at him, bewitchingly.

As I walked discreetly away, I heard Nell giggle. "Goodness! I don't believe a word of this but I hope it will be good."

They were so long about the business that, becoming restless, I sauntered back. "I don't want to interfere with fate," I began, "but —"

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"Pooh!" Mona interrupted. "It's quite early." She rested her hand on the Romany's sleeve as if she'd known him for years. "What time is it, Mr.-er —?"

"Rialando," he volunteered, his eyes avid. Somehow she seemed to have hypnotized the fellow for, without a by-your-leave, she took hold of his massive gold chain and jerked his watch from his pocket. She released the spring and the lid flew open. "Why, it's only three," she said, snapping it shut and thrusting it back. It was an outrageous familiarity and it angered me to see the gipsy pass his tongue over his thick lips; but Mona seemed oblivious and Nell was laughing.

"I can't believe it," she was saying, "*Five* children!" And then, suddenly, I remembered what I had seen. The highly-colored picture of some saint pasted inside the lid of the gipsy's watch!

"I knew it," Mona exclaimed when, later, I told her about the picture and Cincotta's reference to Varella's superstition. "The gipsies lured him to the camp, robbed and murdered him, and heaved his body into that paddock."

"My dear girl," I remonstrated, "why will you persist in associating Mr. Varella with the corpse? In the first place, Joe was a man with whiskers and rings in his ears. . . ."

"There!" Mona cried, excitedly. "I knew there was something. That body had *had* rings in its ears. Don't you remember how I told Nell we'd found a dead gipsy? I'd forgotten, but now I remember. Surely you noticed his ears had been pierced?"

"No, I didn't," I said, a little sulky. Then I shook my head. "It won't do. It's purely coincidence. Cincotta didn't recognize the body. And your gipsy friends are not so strong they could heave a corpse thirty feet. No, Mona my love, they'd have had to drag him and they'd have left traces. And don't forget, my precious, he wrote a valedictory message to Valda."

"I told you he can't write," she countered.

"Well, got someone to write for him. And while your naked friend was in the morgue the bareback rider was in the city sending a telegram to Mr. Cincotta instructing him to salve Valda's feelings with ten pounds."

"I don't care," Mona said, obstinately. "I think we should tell the policeman."

"I'll tell him about the watch," I said, "but I don't expect him to do anything about it. That is, unless there's been a complaint that it was stolen." I put my arms around her. "Don't let this thing get you down, my pet. The circus has gone. Cincotta has gone. Valda has gone. And Varella has gone. Stop being Mrs. Sherlock and be the doctor's wife."

"I suppose I should," she said, "but I can't help thinking of that poor girl hanging by her toes."

"Actually, you're being sorry for yourself," I said. "Because Valda resembles you, you put yourself in her place. If she'd been a frowsy little

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imitation blonde you'd have forgotten her long ago."

"You can be terribly wise, Rodney," she said, meekly, then kissed me excitingly. "If ever I run away, be sure to smack me when I come back."

When I awoke next morning she'd gone. An envelope stuck on the mirror bore the dramatic message, FAREWELL, in Mona's characteristic scrawl.

I was at the door in a bound, shouting for Nell. She appeared at once.

"Now, don't get excited," she said. "She's only eloped."

"What *is* this joke?"

"She's motored to the city with Tommy Stewart," she informed me in mock horror, then grinned impishly. "Tommy's wife went with them."

I suppose I looked a little sheepish for she patted my arm. "There," she said, consolingly. "It takes time getting used to Mona. You've only had her two years. I've known her a lifetime."

When Mona came back she looked radiant. "Darling," she cried, throwing her arms about me, "I hope you were frantic. But I was quite safe. Tommy drives beautifully and his wife kept her eye on him all the time."

"And that's all the explanation I get?"

"For the present, Dr. Fusspot." She was thoughtful a moment. "Could you find out where the circus is?"

"No, I can't," I said. "I'm sick of the circus."

"Then I shall ask that nice policeman, Mr. Cobblestone."

"Copestone," I corrected, and added, ungraciously, "What is it you want him to do?"

"Get a circus pass for you and me. You know — a free ticket. Admit Two."

"For heaven's sake, Mona, be sensible," I said. "The circus is probably a hundred miles away. We've seen it, and we don't want to see it again. Even if we did we could afford to pay. We don't want a free ticket."

"Ah, but we do, darling," she replied. "Just an admit-two from that white-slaver."

"Cincotta is *not* a white-slaver."

"Well, he looks like one," Mona said, unperturbed. "Another thing! I want that poor girl taken off the trapeze and brought here."

I sat down heavily and she caressed my hair. "Darling," she said, "you weren't really upset about my clearing out with Tommy, were you? I'll get you some aspirin."

"I don't want aspirin," I said. "All I want is some sense out of what you're saying. All this nonsense about bringing Valda back! *Why?*"

"Why?" she repeated in surprise. "To identify Mr. Varella's body. It's still here, isn't it?"

"No," I said, "they've taken it to the city. And it isn't Varella. Varella is alive and probably kicking. I'm not going to Copestone with any cock-and-bull story."

"You don't have to talk about cocks and bulls at all," Mona retorted

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with spirit. "All right," she added, "we'll forget about it. Every single thing."

From experience I knew that was just what she was not going to do.

We had barely finished dinner when a goggling maid informed us that the policeman wanted Mona on the phone. She rose hurriedly and we heard her honey-sweet voice. "Oh, that's splendid, Mr. Cob — Copestone. I think you're wonderful. We'll be right over."

Nell raised her eyebrows. "Here we go," she said. "Plunging into crime again."

Mona bustled in as if we were all dying for a good old romp with a corpse. "Mr. Copestone says we can go over at once," she said, her eyes shining. "It won't take a minute. Just fancy, Rodney, he remembered that the white-slaver gave him a pass for the sanitary inspector and the sanitary inspector's wife was having a ten-pound baby girl and couldn't go so he's still got it."

On our way I said: "Listen, Mona. I haven't a notion what this is all about."

"Oh, but you *have*, darling," she said in genuine surprise. "It's about the admit-two and the telegram the white-slaver got from Varella."

"Don't keep on calling Cincotta a white-slaver," I said sternly, as a passer-by, who had caught the word, turned and stared.

"All right," she agreed. "I'll just say W. S. and you'll know."

Copestone made quite a fuss over Mona, settling her in the best chair, then dived into a drawer. "There you are, ma'am," he said. Mona took the pasteboard he produced. It was characteristic of her that she gave him a dazzling smile before she looked at the card on which she had built high hopes. When at last she looked at it she said, "Yes, it's the same," and from her bag produced a folded paper, spreading it before us.

The paper was a telegraph form — one that had been handed in for transmission. It read: "I admit nothing but give Valda ten pounds for me."

"What is this?" Copestone asked.

"That," Mona said, with a little note of triumph, "is the telegram Mr. Varella sent to the W. S. — I mean to Cincotta — after he died."

"Died?" Copestone exclaimed. "How could he send it if he was dead?"

"He didn't," Mona explained. "Cincotta sent it himself to make it look as if Mr. Varella was alive."

I studied the form with new interest, recalling how Cincotta had thrust the message into my hand impressing upon me it had been sent that morning.

"Where did you get this?" I asked Mona.

Just for a moment she appeared confused. "Well, dear," she said. "I suddenly remembered Leo White. He's something awfully important in the head post office. I knew he could get it for me." She hurried on. "You remember Leo, surely, dear? The tall

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dark boy who took me to the theatre on nights when you had to study."

"I don't understand," Copestone said. "Who is Varella?"

"He's the dead man in the paddock," Mona said, promptly.

"Nothing of the sort, Sergeant," I objected. "She's guessing."

"Varella was a circus man?" Copestone asked.

"With rings in his ears and whiskers. Cincotta shaved them off — the whiskers I mean — and put him in the paddock," my wife told him.

"Mona!" I exclaimed. "This is outrageous. We have nothing against Mr. Cincotta. All the experts say the body fell from an airplane."

"That's right, ma'am," the policeman said. "It's the only conclusion you could come to. There were absolutely no signs of anyone ever being near the body."

"Well," Mona said, "I don't know how it got there but I am sure Cincotta did it."

"He didn't recognize the body," Copestone said, heavily.

"Well, you wouldn't expect him to bound in and say, 'Oh, goody, here's the man I murdered,' now would you?" Mona smiled.

"But," I objected, "we don't even know he sent the wire."

"Oh, yes, we do," she replied. "But we wouldn't have found out if Mr. Copestone hadn't so cleverly remembered about the sanitary man's free pass." She took up the pasteboard. "See, it says, Admit Two. Look at the 'Admit.' Now look at the 'Admit' on the telegraph form."

There wasn't the slightest doubt that the words had been written by the same hand.

"Cincotta killed Varella," Mona announced, definitely. "And he wants you to think Joe is alive. I bet the note Valda got was written by Cincotta, too. When I think of that poor girl going to have a baby on the high trapeze —"

Copestone cleared his throat loudly. "Perhaps you had better tell it *all*," he said and spread an enormous sheaf of paper before him. Carefully he selected a nib. "Now then, nice and clear like, eh?"

It was over at last and the sergeant said: "There's some funny aspects but it all hinges on the identity of the corpse. Perhaps this M'lle. Valda should view the body."

"Yes," my wife said, quietly. "I think that, too. It's hateful, but she would have to know sometime."

"We'll be tactful," Copestone promised. "Now, ma'am, you're sure you have told us everything?"

"Why, yes," Mona said, picking up her bag. She suddenly put it down again. "Oh, I forgot all about the gipsy and the watch."

"Gipsy? Watch?" Copestone blinked.

"Yes," Mona went on, "yesterday I went to the camp again." She gave me an apologetic glance. "I persuaded Mrs. Stewart to have her fortune told. It was awfully good. She's going to have three husbands. And while

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the woman was telling it I got that fat gipsy on one side and I told him he was going to be arrested for murder."

"Mona! for heaven's sake!" I ejaculated.

"I told him he had the corpse's watch and I asked him if he didn't kill him, how did he get it? He was terribly flustered."

"I'll bet he was," Nell said, dryly.

"He told me all about it — in confidence, of course," Mona went on. "He pinched it off Varella the night he was murdered."

"*If* he was murdered," Copestone amended, painstakingly. "So this Varella was at the camp?"

"Yes," Mona said, blandly. "He was there with Mr. Cincotta."

I leaned across Copestone's desk. "Mona," I said, "don't make such definite statements unless you're sure."

"But I am sure, darling," she said. "Didn't the gipsy tell me?" She appealed to Nell. "You know him. The fat one who told you you'd have five children. You said yourself that you thought he told the truth."

I hardly noticed Nell's blush. "And Valda was there, too?"

Mona nodded. "Varella and Valda had their fortunes told, then they all drove off in their truck." She thrust her hand into her bag. "There's the watch to prove it," she said and handed it to Copestone. "Mr. Rialando says he never wants to see the damn thing again."

"If it wasn't for the way the corpse was found," Copestone said as we left, "this would look very pretty, but even if Valda recognizes the body we still don't know how it got where Daffy found it."

"Did Daffy hear any plane that morning?" I enquired.

"Yes, he heard one," Copestone grinned, "but he also heard the Angel Gabriel."

"Perhaps," suggested Nell, "it was Mr. Cincotta who dropped the body from the plane."

Copestone dealt with the suggestion with official gravity. "No, miss, if he was at the camp as alleged, there wouldn't have been time. You can't pick up a plane like a taxi."

"Unless," I said, "he'd arranged for one. That's pretty flat country."

Copestone telephoned me late next afternoon. He'd caught up with the circus and rushed Valda to the city. No, Cincotta hadn't objected. "But it's no go," the sergeant told me. "The girl couldn't recognize the corpse."

When I told Mona she stared at me as if she couldn't believe it; then she burst into tears.

For the next two days golf had my serious and undivided attention. In the evenings my wife appeared quieter than usual but seemed to have forgotten the murder.

It was a shock, therefore, when meeting Copestone on my first morning free from golf, he said, "If I might say so, doctor, that wife of yours is a very remarkable woman."

"Indeed," I said with foreboding.

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He watched me slyly. "Says I'll become Chief of Police."

I recognized Mona's brand of flattery and sighed. "Tell me the worst, Copestone. What is she up to now?"

"As a matter of fact, doc," he said. "I'm running her up to Parriwatta. Cincotta's circus is there tonight."

"Now, listen, sergeant," I said. "If my wife is still harking —"

He interrupted me. "I thought you'd come along, doc. I think it might be interesting."

I taxed Mona later. "But you were at Parriwatta yesterday," I said. "With that Stewart fellow and his mother."

She nodded. "We had a bush picnic on the way. The circus is there two nights. Darling, do please come. I promise I won't open my mouth about the old murder the whole way."

Which, just then, was exactly what I didn't want.

As we parked at Parriwatta it was dark. We could hear the circus music and see the shadows of people sitting on the back bleachers. Mona led the way, stepping carefully over guy ropes and moving in and out among the caravans surrounding the big top. In a few minutes she stopped, pointing. "There's her tent, Mr. Copestone."

Copestone said: "You two wait." I drew Mona into the shadows and watched him step up to Valda's tent. A shadow appeared on the canvas, grew enormously, and the girl came into view. She was wearing tights as in the picture Daffy had shown us, and started as she saw the uniformed figure. We heard Copestone mumble something.

She appeared to hesitate, then her voice came clearly: "Not here — I share this tent. Let's walk across the lot." She disappeared, returning instantly, a cloak draped about her, and with the policeman, moved out of the line of light.

Mona leaned against me suddenly, breathing hard. "It's hot," she said.

"It isn't hot at all," I said, alarmed. "You're fainting."

Despite her protests I carried her across the intervening gloom into Valda's tent, and sat her on a trunk, then looked about for water. Finding none, I stepped outside and moved toward the caravan alongside. The door was open and the interior lit. There was no one inside. I glanced back and saw Mona's profile silhouetted on the side of the tent; and then, suddenly, there was a man standing alongside the shadow with only the canvas dividing him and her.

I heard him whisper, "*Valda*," and saw the shadowed head lift slightly. The voice continued: "Listen, the policeman is here. You must be careful. Behave naturally. You must do the act. Understand?"

The silhouetted head nodded and in a moment the man had gone. Without moving from where I stood, I reached out and pushed the caravan door slightly so that a beam of light streamed directly across his path. I

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had no more than a glimpse but it was sufficient to show me it was Cincotta. I had barely time to rush over and ask Mona if she were all right when Copestone and Valda returned.

Valda stared at my wife, then that enigmatic smile altered her whole expression. "I might have known," she said.

Someone bawled in the darkness. "Valda, you've got five minutes!"

The smile never left her face. She turned to Copestone. "The show's got to go on. You don't mind?" She looked at Mona. "Excuse me," she said. "There's a letter I must send." She walked inside the tent and sat at a make-shift table, her back to us. Nobody spoke.

After what seemed an age, the voice bawled again: "Valda, you're on!"

She rose. "I must go," she said and handed Mona an envelope. "Would you post it?"

"Of course," Mona said.

The girl regarded Copestone quietly. "You ought to go in and watch," she said. "You get in for nothing, don't you?" Next moment the darkness had swallowed her and I heard the band start the music for her act.

Copestone was preoccupied as we walked to the entrance of the big top, and Mona said, "I'll stand in the air. You go in."

"You're sure you're all right?"

"Please. Go in," she urged.

Standing in the entrance I could see Valda high in the tent posing on the rope, wrapping it about her tinselled waist, kissing her fingers to the crowd outside the orbit of the spotlight. Occasionally the beam picked up the gleaming white of Cincotta's shirt in the ring below.

The music ceased as Valda returned to the trapeze and gracefully acknowledged the applause. Suddenly, she stood and reaching up, detached a rope from some gear above her head. It had a buckled end and this she clipped to the seat of the trapeze. Then, sitting with lower limbs extended, and with every gesture and movement reeking of circus, she began to manipulate the other end of the rope.

I heard Cincotta's surprised ejaculation and heard him call "*Valda!*". There was consternation in his voice. Copestone sensed something unrehearsed was happening and made a step forward. The queer Mona Lisa smile played about the lips of the girl and as Cincotta cried again, "*Valda!*" I saw that she had contrived a loop in the free end of the rope. This she held up for the audience to see, smiling through it; then she looped the rope about her slender neck. She looked down and around her again, kissing her fingertips to each section of the audience in turn.

There was that deathly silence that showmanship insists must preface all death-defying acts and then the unbelievable happened. We heard Cincotta cry "*No!*" I am sure the crowd thought it was "*Go!*" Copestone cried, "Good God," and then Valda

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dropped from the trapeze like a stone. Down, down, down, until she stopped suddenly in mid-air with a hideous jerk and the silver sequins on her pink tights threw out myriad flashes as the shapely body spun, then twitched convulsively and hung in an attitude of shameful death.

"You shouldn't let it worry you," Copestone said later at Nell's house. "It saved a lot of trouble."

"I only wanted to help her," Mona said. "I thought Cincotta killed him, but when she said she didn't recognize the body, I knew she was hiding something. I believed Cincotta was frightening her into silence."

The policeman said: "I think they were both in it."

"It was Valda who killed him," Mona said, and handed Copestone a letter. "I didn't realize it was addressed to me. It's all there." While Copestone read, she told me.

Cincotta, Varella, and Valda left the gipsy camp, Varella driving the truck. He'd had a big win at the races and Valda said: "Now you can marry me." He laughed at her and produced a roll of notes waving them in her face. "Look!" he said. "There's a thousand pounds there and I wouldn't give you a single tenner for yourself *or* Cincotta's brat."

Mona said: "It was the first time Valda realized he knew who was the baby's father. Cincotta couldn't marry her even if he wanted to because he was married already. Varella kept boasting about the money he could make and the women he could have, and how he would eventually settle down and marry some *nice* girl."

All the while, it seemed, Valda sitting between the two men could feel the bulge in Cincotta's pocket that was his gun. In the end she couldn't stand Varella's taunts. She shot him while he was waving the notes in her face. Cincotta leaned over and took the money. He owed Varella five hundred on a gambling debt so he was fifteen hundred up if he could get away with it. But it was his gun, and his word against Valda's.

He said: "We'll split fifty-fifty. I know just what to do."

I glanced quickly through Valda's letter. "It doesn't say what he did," I said. "How did they get his body into the paddock?"

Copestone said: "Cincotta is a showman. He knows how easily the mind can be diverted. Conjurers always keep you watching something that really doesn't matter. He and Valda cooked up a plausible excuse for Varella leaving the circus, and their method of disposing of the body clinched the whole thing. Afterwards he whipped back to the city somehow and arranged for a wire to be sent while Valda drove the lorry on here. Everybody but your good wife forgot the circus."

"And my good wife discovered how Varella's body got into the paddock?"

"Yes, I did, darling," Mona admitted, "but you have to take the credit because you told me all the

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important things *like about the boy complaining there weren't any programs.* I thought to myself, there's something that w.s. is trying to hide. Then you told me he'd promised Valda would do *another* act. Somehow that made me remember there was something I'd forgotten about the picture Daffy showed us. So I went and had tea with him . . . out of a pannikin."

"But why, in heaven's name?"

"I asked him to show me Valda's picture — the one he thought was me without clothes."

Copestone coughed and I gritted my teeth. "And he did?"

"He was awfully sweet, darling. He gave it to me." She began fiddling in her bag. "We'll have to find some theatrical costumers when we go home and hire the tights."

"Tights?" Nell gasped. "Who for?"

"Why, for me," Mona said. "I had to promise Daffy I'd give him a lovely framed picture for the one I took away."

"Over my dead body," I said.

"Now, darling," she said, "don't be difficult. After all, Daffy's picture of Valda put us on the track." She handed me the print the half-wit had shown us. "I remembered the wonderful clue you gave me the day we discovered the body."

"What clue?" I asked and read the caption under the picture.

M'LLE. VALDA,
THE HUMAN CANNON BALL

"What clue?" she repeated. "Why, surely you remember? You asked me how I'd like to be *shot off the highway.* I began thinking and asked Mr. Copestone had he seen many circuses and then he said, "Well, I'm b——"

Copestone coughed. He said: "It struck me all of a heap, Doc."

"So," Mona went on, "he had a good look through the circus and there it was."

"There what was?" I asked.

"Why, the big, wooden cannon, darling. Don't be so dense."

"It was there all right, doc," Copestone said. "After they'd done him in, they stripped him, shaved him, pushed him into the muzzle of the cannon which is really a camouflaged catapult and which they were carrying on the truck as part of the circus props, drove to the crest of the Hummocks, and shot him over."

"Don't you see, darling?" Mona said. "The Human Cannon Ball. It was a copy of the act Valda did in the circus. They used to shoot her out of the gun into a net . . . only there was no net for Mr. Varella."

ABOUT THE STORY: *For the past two semesters Dashiell Hammett has been conducting two classes in* THE MYSTERY STORY. *One class is a lecture-and-discussion group; the other is a Workshop in which selected students actually write detective short stories, read them in class, and submit to pro-*

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fessional and round-table criticism. At least a half-dozen times Mr. Hammett has invited your Editor to participate in both the open-forums and Lab. work and we must confess that we have always enjoyed enormously the role of being a Guest Expert — or, to be guilty of a bad pun, of being a Visiting Ferretman. The pertinent point, however, is the manner in which Mr. Hammett has consistently introduced Ellery Queen to his pupils. The first time he pulled it, we were left speechless; after that, we devised various quips, purely by way of self-defense. Invariably Mr. Hammett would comment on the great privilege it was to have a genuine triple-threat man (writer-editor-critic) come to his classes to answer questions, and Mr. Hammett would start the ball rolling by asking the first question himself. Whereupon, with a perfectly dead pan, Mr. Hammett would inquire: Mr. Queen, will you be good enough to explain your famous character's sex life, if any?

Well, you've got to admit that's an embarrassing question. The truth is, the sex life of most fictional detectives is a perplexing literary problem. The hardboiled school — writers like Hammett and Chandler — have solved the difficulty after their own fashion. They're for it: they combine sex and sleuthery until you almost can't tell one from the other, or where one leaves off and the other begins. The softboiled school, on the other hand, are "agin" it: they avoid the problem with an almost puritanical delicacy — that is, we hasten to say, in print.

Take the case of Ellery Queen. In his radio and movie careers Ellery has a secretary named Nikki Porter. Nikki can best be described as a charming, attractive female-Watson of the genus "perennial secretary." She never is less, and equally important, she never is more. Occasionally, to add spice to the radio adventures, Ellery and Nikki become involved in a nambypamby triangle: either Ellery makes eyes at another woman, thus causing Nikki to become jealous, or vice versa, Nikki is chased by another man, thus eliciting from Ellery somewhat feeble groans of indignation. But it's all rather adolescent and fleeting. What else can it be?

Stop and think it over. If we permit Ellery and Nikki to fall in love, we've got to do something about it — we can't let them remain indefinitely in a state of suspended adoration. That shouldn't happen to a dog, let alone to print-and-ether characters. After all, good taste does have its legitimate taboos — so, sooner or later, we would be forced to do right by our Nikki. That means a marriage would have to be arranged. And then what would we have? Another husband-and-wife detecting team.

Note that we said another. *In all sincerity, aren't there enough 'tecting twosomes as it is? Books, radio, and movies are full of 'em, and of all types — sophisticated, romantic, Bohemian, wise-cracking, whatnot. Why add*

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another domestic duet to the plethora already in existence? No, to all intents and purposes and over our dead bodies, Ellery will remain a bachelor bloodhound, and Nikki will continue to be his girl Sunday (or whatever other day of the week "The Adventures of Ellery Queen" may happen to be broadcast in the future). We'll have no part of matrimonial manhunting.

That is, auctorially. Editorially, we have no antipathy whatever to husband-and-wife snooping. Crime-crushing couples have appeared in EQMM regularly, and with our blessing. We have brought you Agatha Christie's Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, Margaret Manners's Desdemona (Squeakie) and David Meadow, Valma Clark's Hollis and Marjorie Mears, Patrick Quentin's Peter and Iris Duluth, Frances Crane's Pat and Jean Abbott, among others.

Hence our delight (critical, if not creative) in the story you have just read, A. E. Martin's "The Flying Corpse." Although Mr. Martin is an Australian, it is perfectly fair to classify his 'tec tandem as strictly English. Mona and Rodney — and this we found extremely interesting — represent the contemporary British version of Frances and Richard Lockridge's Mr. and Mrs. North, blended slightly with Dashiell Hammett's Nick and Nora Charles. Mona and Rodney — and aren't those names "exquisitely true to type"?— prove again that "marriage and hanging go by destiny," that "marriage is a desperate thing" (for the evildoer), that "marriage is a noose" (for the murderer), that "marriage resembles a pair of shears . . . often moving in opposite directions, yet always punishing anyone who comes between them."

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Most people think the late Channing Pollock was exclusively a playwright. It is true that Mr. Pollock devoted most of his energies and time to the drama, always fighting against "sex, crime, and sophistication," but it is also true that he had many more strings to his literary bow. He was a novelist, a rather famous lecturer, an essayist of great popular appeal, a broadcaster, a poet, a writer of screenplays — and did you know that Channing Pollock wrote Fannie Brice's memorable hit song, "My Man"?

In prose Mr. Pollock sometimes lets down the bars. For example, his excellent short-short, "Hold-Up," is unquestionably a crime story. True, there is no sex or sophistication in it, but there is charm — a quality Channing Pollock achieved in much of his work.

HOLD-UP

by CHANNING POLLOCK

You felt sorry for the poor little man the minute you saw him. He looked into the washroom of the Pullman inquiringly, as though expecting to be told he had no right to be there, and, ten minutes later, he lit a cheap cigar with the air of one prepared to apologize.

I had been reading, as well as the electric lighting of those days permitted, and I sized up the little man over the top of my newspaper. He was stockily built, with a square head on which the hair, in spite of attention, looked unruly. His clothing was ready-made, of a coarse mixed cloth that achieved the color of rusty iron, and on his waistcoat he wore the dull metal emblem of some benevolent something-or-other. A small-town tradesman, I thought, or a farmer.

As a matter of fact, he was neither. "I had a kind of an express business in Omaha," he said. "Two wagons. My wife got sick, and we had to send her to Denver. The doctor won't let her come back, so I sold out, and I'm going to join up with her. Was either of you two gentlemen ever in Denver?"

I'm not much given to smoking-room confidences, so I merely nodded, but the other "gentleman," who had seemed to me too sleek and well-tailored, was quite ready to tell us about it. The little man needed companionship, and soon they were chatting away about things in general, and the sick wife and the express business in particular.

The express business hadn't been good, and he was glad to be out of it. He'd have been glad, anyway. Married twenty-six years, and this was the first time they'd been separated. Kind of helpless, Carrie was, and missed him like anything. Pretty sick, too. Maybe they wouldn't have much longer to-

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gether. Maybe only a year or two. Couldn't afford to waste any of it. Got to get a job in Denver. Could hold out a little while, on the proceeds of the express business, but sickness cost money, and Carrie mustn't be worried. Good deal of a baby, Carrie was. "I suppose you don't know anybody in Denver?"

The tall gentleman did. A fellow in the express business. Odd, wasn't it? And odd that, at that moment, my eye should have fallen on something about train robbery. "Al Martin broke jail last night at Cheyenne," I read aloud. "There were five other men concerned in his escape, and they rode out of town shooting in all directions. A sheriff's posse lost them just north of Ariosa. The railroads are putting armed guards on all trains bound west from Omaha."

"I haven't seen any with us," said the tall gentleman.

"Guess we left before the news came," hazarded the little man. "Gee, I'd hate to lose my six hundred dollars."

"Six hundred!"

"It ain't much, of course," the expressman admitted, apologetically, "but all any man's got seems a whole lot to *him*. I ain't taking no chances. It's all sewed up inside of my vest, and I don't think no train robber's going to be smart enough to get it."

"I wish I'd thought of that," said the tall gentleman. "I've a watch I'd hate to lose. It belonged to my grandfather."

From then on, the talk was of desperadoes, and their doings. The bad men had been pretty much wiped out of the West, but there were a few of them left, fighting a losing fight against thickening population and modern methods of pursuit. Al Martin and his gang were almost sole survivors, but they had a long record of bank and train robberies, and the name inspired terror. Our tones were a little hushed as we talked, speeding through the darkness and sagebrush.

Confidence returned with time, and the little man was telling us about his wife's biscuits when it happened. A sharp fusillade, a grinding of brakes, and the train stopped so suddenly that I lurched across the room and into the lap of the sleek gentleman. He had half risen, and made a movement toward his hip pocket, but the impact threw him down again, and, when we had disentangled ourselves, there were two newcomers in the compartment, and each of them held a revolver. "Hands up," said the first, "and *stand* up. The big guy's got a gun, Charlie. Now, gents, keep 'em up, and Charlie'll take the collection."

Charlie did — with neatness and dispatch. He began with the big guy's gun, and a digital inspection of all our hip pockets. Then he favored me with his attention, and accumulated a wallet and some odd pieces of jewelry. These deposited in an open bag, he ran his hands quickly over my person and, satisfied that he had everything of value, turned to the expressman. The first invader stood in the doorway, with his weapon seemingly trained

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on my belt-buckle, and sounds from outside indicated that something of much the same sort was occurring to a good many other people.

The expressman didn't take a minute. Charlie's expert eye had sized up his possibilities, and the little man got away with a couple of digs into coat pockets that yielded nothing of importance. The first thing that came out of the sleek gentleman's apparel was his grandfather's watch. "I'd hate to lose that," said the sleek gentleman. "It's an heirloom."

"A what?" inquired Charlie.

"It belonged to my grandfather."

Charlie didn't seem impressed. The timepiece in his left hand, he advanced with his right extended to feel the outside of the sleek gentleman's coat. But our friend had never taken his eye from the heirloom. "You won't get a ten-spot for that," he said. "Let me alone, and I'll tell you where to find six hundred dollars you'd never have thought of."

I could see the little man turn white.

"Maybe you'll tell anyway," said Charlie, doubling a fist the size of a tobacco jar.

"Nix," remarked the man with the revolver. There was command in his tone, and I felt certain we had had the honor of meeting Mr. Martin. "We ain't got no time for a rough-house. They're through out there. It's a bargain, brother; where's the six hundred?"

"Sewed inside the little man's vest."

They had to fight for it, but they got it. I heard the bills crackle as Charlie tossed the worn garment into his bag. Five minutes later, Mr. Martin had rejoined his friends in the sagebrush, three shots had been fired into the air, and the train was on its way. The little man looked pretty sick, but the fight wasn't all out of him. "You skunk!" he exclaimed, turning on the tall gentleman.

I was preparing to second the motion.

But the tall gentleman merely smiled. "Keep your shirt on," he remarked, and opened his own waistcoat. From the inside pocket he drew a thick canvas envelope, and began counting big bills. "Here's your money," he said, "and an extra hundred for good measure. I've been working the race track in Omaha, and I've got twenty-two thousand dollars done up in this bundle. I bought the watch last night in a pawnshop. It isn't worth much, but you might slip it to Carrie as a souvenir."

The little man sat down heavily.

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Another excerpt from one of Vincent Cornier's letters to your Editor: Mr. Cornier has a plot for a detective story that sounds like an absolute classic. The plot is based on one simple snapshot photograph. That single, ordinary snapshot does the following for the detective: it (a) identifies the murderer; (b) reveals the motive for the crime; (c) tells the time of death; (d) proves that the victim had gone to a certain place and had returned immediately prior to having been killed; (e) definitely links all the clues in the case, from Alpha to Omega, in such a comprehensive manner as to SHOW the whole movement of the story. Imagine a detective-story writer setting himself this terrific problem — and solving it!

Dear Mr. Cornier: Write that story! Send it to EQMM!

We can't wait!

In the meantime here is another amazing adventure of the Black Monk — the third story in the saga of Barnabas Hildreth — the tale we have been promising you for so long — the extraordinary affair in which a bullet fired in the year 1710 wounded a bank cashier in the year 1933.

THE SHOT THAT WAITED

by VINCENT CORNIER

In the calculation an allowance has to be made for the *Gregorian Correction* of the calendar in 1752. Then it becomes apparent that the time elapsed between the firing of that bullet and its plunge into Westmacott's body was exactly two hundred and twenty-two years, two months, one week, five days, twelve hours and forty-seven minutes. . . .

The dueling pistol from which it was shot was fired by Ensign the Honorable Nigel Koffard. He was a young officer in one of Marlborough's crack squadrons and had but recently homed to England after the decisive bloodiness of Malplaquet. The man whom his shot wounded two hundred odd years after was Mr. Henry Leonard Westmacott, a branch-cashier of the London and Southern Counties Bank.

Nigel Koffard pressed the trigger of that pistol, in the park of Ravenshaw Hall, Derbyshire, at precisely eight o'clock on the radiant morning of August the second, 1710.

Henry Westmacott was sitting by his own hearthside in the drawing-room of The Nook, Bettington Avenue, Thornton Heath, Surrey, when Koffard's bullet struck him and shattered his right shoulder. He had just settled down — on the dismal and rainy night of October the twenty-third, last year — intending to listen to a concert broadcast from the

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Queen's Hall. The ball hit him as the B.B.C. announcer was concluding an apology for the program being late by saying: "It is now eight forty-seven, and we are taking you straight over ——"

Thus was the second time most accurately determined.

All the day long, young Mrs. Westmacott had been anxious about their little boy, Brian. He was running a slight temperature.

Hence she no sooner had dinner ended when she needs must go up to the nursery. In the swift way of tummy-troubled baby boys, Brian had contrived to lose his pains. He was sleeping serenely.

Pamela Westmacott smiled ruefully as she rearranged his cot clothes . . . The shot, the groan, and the stumbling fall among the fire-irons all sounded on that instant. With mechanical acumen Mrs. Westmacott also noted that some china crashed to ruin in the kitchen, and that the opening chords of the Symphony Orchestra's performance were lost to a thud and a sudden silence.

She rushed down the stairs to collide with her maidservant, who had burst with almost equal speed from her domain.

"Oh, ma'am! Wh-what in the name o'glory's happened?"

"Hush, Biddy, and stay there! I — I'll see what's the matter."

Westmacott had raised himself to his knees and was delicately pawing at his right shoulder.

"Henry! Henry — darling!" Pamela Westmacott was down beside him. "What's gone wrong?" Then she saw the sodden red horror of his shoulder. "Oh, my poor old boy! . . . *Biddy* —' phone Doctor Smithers and the police. Tell them to hurry. Say Mr. Westmacott has been shot!"

When doctor and police arrived Westmacott had been got to bed. He was fully conscious and calm, despite his excruciating pain. His wife had managed him in a way that won Doctor Smithers' admiration.

Smithers turned to her with a smile as he unscrewed the nozzle of the syringe with which he had administered an opiate.

"Sensible woman, Mrs. Westmacott! You made everything very easy. . . . What's that? . . . *Dangerous*? Oh, no, not at all! Direct compound fracture of the *scapula* socket and a flake chipped off the head of the *humerus*. Painful, but that's all."

Old Smithers patted her hands and definitely pressed her to the door. "Now run along and leave hubby to me. Go down and satisfy the curiosity of those exceedingly impatient policemen. Above all, don't — worry."

The police were certainly impatient. Their cross-examination had foundered poor Biddy. After their dismissal of her she had gone back to the kitchen to blubber among the neglected crockery.

In Mrs. Westmacott was discovered harder and less hysterical material. She told them all she knew. Essentially because it tallied so exactly with

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Biddy's account, the officers became more and more confounded. . . .

"But are you absolutely *sure*, Mrs. Westmacott, no one came out of this room as you rushed down the stairs? Or slipped out by the front door."

"Oh, dear, how many more times must I tell you? No!" Wearily she smoothed her forehead. "Who could have done so?"

"Whoever fired that shot," grunted Inspector Ormesby. "There's no weapon to be found. The windows are all properly secured. There isn't any glass broken. Your husband wasn't potted at by someone lurking in the garden — that's self-evident. And he couldn't possibly have shot himself." The Inspector nodded toward the radio cabinet which the bullet had struck. "The position of his wound and the subsequent flight of the missile settles *that* . . . Somebody shot him! Then who was it?"

A plainclothes officer turned from his inspection of the damaged cabinet. He had been penciling notes referring to the tarnished ball of lead which showed itself, half-embedded, in the seven-ply veneered woodwork. It had struck a spot directly in front of a radio tube, and the impact had been sufficient to shatter filaments, so stopping reception.

This man's talking was far less truculent than that of Inspector Ormesby. But it was deadlier.

"You've told us that the front door was locked for the night. Have I got that right?"

"Yes, you have."

"I noticed that a little brass bolt is on the inner side of the door. Then there's the main lock and a Yale latch. All of 'em secured?"

"No. The key of the big lock wasn't turned, but the bolt was pushed home. Naturally the latch held as well."

"Had you to open those to let us in?"

"I had."

The plainclothes man watched her through half-closed eyes.

"Now, you remember, you also told us that you came helter-skeltering down the stairs at such a rate that you bumped into this Bridget O'Hara woman at the bottom. And she'd just flown out of the kitchen?"

"Perfectly correct. When the shot was fired, Biddy dropped a plate or something. Then she rushed here. We — we converged on the room."

"No one went out of the door." It seemed that the plainclothes man was musing aloud. "No one, so you say, went up the stairs past you. No one could have doubled out by way of the kitchen, and no one could have doubled out of here back into the dining-room or into the cupboard under the stairs, without you or your servant seeing 'em . . . *Um-m-m!*" He paused, and ignored Mrs. Westmacott completely, to smile past her at Inspector Ormesby. "*And no weapon found,*" he slowly murmured. "You carry on here, Inspector. Strikes me I'll have to have another heart-to-heart talk with our faithful Bridget."

Pamela Westmacott flinched as

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though a viper had reared itself before her eyes as she watched the inimical C.I.D. man saunter from the room. Mad as it seemed, fantastic and unreal as it was, nevertheless she realized she was the suspect here.

Now let interpolation be made of the somewhat astounding experience of an official police photographer, called Coghill.

A genial little fellow, Egbert Coghill; a craftsman of infinite patience and capability. He was the man who went to The Nook the next day and acting on police instructions, set about securing photographs of the drawing-room and, more especially, the bullet-splintered radio set.

Cheerily, with an incessant whispering whistle, he moved about and made himself quite at home. He dumped his big camera on a table. The black leather case, which contained his plates in their mahogany slides, he placed in front of the radio cabinet. Still softly whistling, he pottered around, making his notes and selecting his objects and angles.

Thereafter he erected his camera and made various long exposures. He took photographs of the door, the windows, the blood-stained rug, the untidy hearth, and the armchair in which Westmacott was sitting when he was wounded. After these, Coghill concentrated on his most important work. He removed his plate carrier from its place in front of the radio set and focused on the half-embedded bullet and the starry matrix wherein it lay. He expended his remaining four plates on this.

When he came to the development of his material, Coghill was astonished and alarmed. Without exception, each dripping negative held — superimposed on its actual detail — a wee portrait of something that appeared to be an astronomical portrait view of the planet Saturn. These were ring-impounded orbs which had a quality of eerie brilliancy that had struck the plates with something amounting almost to halation. Yet they were mottled by shadows of an intensity and a delicacy Mr. Egbert Coghill had never previously developed out of any sensitive emulsion.

More than this phenomena, the four exposures of the radio cabinet were useless. These, which should have been Coghill's acme, not only bore the eerie imprint of the tiny incandescent "planet," but a great maelstrom of fog about the place where the bullet should have been. The cabinet was clear enough. Only that area which should have been occupied by a representation of the leaden slug was at fault.

Mr. Coghill equipped himself with another camera and a new assortment of plates. Back he went to the drawing-room of The Nook. He duplicated his previous exposures and again developed them.

None of this second group of negatives showed the Saturn-like globe. Equally, none of the seven plates he had, secondarily, exposed on the cabinet front was in any better state

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than the former four. Except for the non-appearance of the queer orb, there were the identical coils of fogginess about the splintered woodwork — *and no sign of the bullet.*

Mr. Egbert Coghill made a number of prints from all these negatives. Together with his notes and the plates themselves, he gave into police keeping. This done, he fared forth and drank deeply.

Without much loss of time those photographs went, by way of Scotland Yard, to a Home Office department in Whitehall: to Barnabas Hildreth. He studied them and puzzled over them, as he afterwards told me, until he was sick to death of the very sight of them. Bewildered, Barnabas then interviewed the Westmacotts.

The unfortunate Henry had nothing of much value to relate. He had been reading, he said, and had just put aside his evening paper to listen to the broadcast. As he leaned back in his chair, he heard a curiously violent hissing as of air escaping from a pin-punctured tire. Then there was a detonation and a fiery enormous blow at his shoulder.

He scouted the idea that anyone could have been in the room with him without his knowledge. And on the subject of the police theory — that his wife had shot him and, in collusion with Bridget O'Hara, had thereafter established incontestable *alibi* — he was sardonically and sulphurously vehement. When he discovered Hildreth so far agreed with him under that head as to veto further official brow-beating, Westmacott became a different man. He was so relieved, so pathetically relieved, that Hildreth was touched — actually was humanized sufficiently to accept an invitation to stay for tea!

So it came about that the grim Intelligence Service officer and Master Brian Westmacott became friends. Hildreth chuckled over this.

"There was no resisting the little beggar, Ingram. He's a sturdy kid and as sensible as the deuce. No sooner had I finished examining the drawing-room than he lugged me off to build what he called a 'weal twue king's palace' — from bits of wood; wood such as I've never seen a child playing with before. He had a big box full of sawn-up chair legs and rails; 'pillars' for his palace. And he'd scores of miniature arches and so forth — all shaped out of carved walnut and mahogany and oak and elm — little blocks, battens, and angle-pieces that had originally been parts of furniture. One glance at 'em showed they were scores of years old and had come from the workshops of masters like Hepplewhite and Chippendale."

I sensed something of extraordinary import here.

"*Oh*, and where'd he get 'em from?"

"Out of the family woodshed. Or, at least, his father had." Hildreth grinned. "I looked it over — lots of the same stuff there. Y'see, Westmacott has a brother in the antique furniture trade: does restorations and repairs and so forth. Westmacott gets

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all the waste from his brother's workshops. The likely bits he cuts up to add to Brian's collection of blocks and pillars. The remainder is burned.

"While I was in the drawing-room, old man" — he deliberately went off at a tangent — "I poked that bullet out of the radio set and took a pair of callipers to it. It's a pistol ball right enough. But where in the name of glory did it come from? And, who cast it — and *when*?"

"'Who cast it?'" I echoed. "What, isn't it an ordinary revolver slug?"

"Mass-produced?" Barnabas rubbed his hands together in glee. "Not on your life! It's as big as a marble and perfectly spherical. And it has marks on it that only the closure of a beautifully accurate bullet-mould could have made. More than that. It's of an unusual calibre — one so unusual that it opens up a tremendous field of conjecture, yet, at the same time, defines the narrowest of tracks. A track, indeed, that a fool could follow.

"Calibres of firearms," he softly stated, "are not little matters left to individual discretion, Ingram. They're registered and pedigreed better than bloodstock — at least, in this country. Ever since 1683 any armorer or gunsmith drilling a new size of bore has had to deposit a specimen barrel and exact measurements with the Tower authorities before he could fit it to a stock or sell or exploit it in any way.

"Remembering that, I asked for records to be searched. The answer is, that ball was cast to be shot out of only two particular types of weapons. It's of a size that's quite obsolete today. Either it could have been shot from a long gun, registered in London by Adolph Levoisier, of Strasbourg, in 1826, or out of a dueling pistol fashioned by Gregory Gannion, a gunsmith who had an establishment in Pall Mall between 1702 and 1754.

"The exact date of Gannion's application for a license to put on the market a weapon of a new type and calibre which he called '*an excellently powerful small-arm, for the practise of the duel, or in other uses, for delicacy and swiftness of discharge in defence or offence*' . . . was February the ninth, 1709. And according to all accounts, the bloodthirsty young bucks of that day went daffy about it. Y'see, it was the first hair-trigger' pistol on the market: ugly but useful.

"I'm working up from that. I've a shrewd idea that good English lead wouldn't come out of a Continental long-gun. *No*, a Gannion dueling pistol seems indicated."

I am getting ever more used to Barnabas Hildreth's tortuous tricks. The queerly precise ordination of those words, "good English lead," made me curious.

"How does one determine the nationality of — er — lead?" I asked.

"All as easily as one differentiates between a Chinaman and a Zulu," he sourly grinned. "By looking at it and studying it.

"According to the assay-notes, furnished me this morning, the lead from which that ball was cast came from one particular area of Derbyshire —

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and nowhere else! What's more, it's almost pure native stuff" — his face shone with some inner ecstatic light — "and so absolutely unique . . . that it's worth its weight, and more, in gold. In fact, if the fervors and excitements of the metallurgical chemists are anything to go by — and they're simply frazzling over it — it's the clue to a pretty fat fortune for someone!"

He got up then, and calmly stalked across to my tantalus and mixed whisky and sodas. Then he challenged me across the brim of his glass.

"Well, old man, all the best! And here's to the speedy solution of one of the neatest mysteries I've struck for months."

So far as I recollect, it was two days later that Hildreth descended on me. He wanted me to go to Thornton Heath with him, and I went. We visited the premises occupied by Westmacott's brother Ralph — Westmacott and Company, Ltd.: "Antique Furniture Restored, Renovated, Repaired, and Reproduced."

Admittedly, Ralph Westmacott had certain specimen pieces in his workshops. These were the magnificent possessions of connoisseurs, to whom the factor of financial worth hardly counted. They were all undergoing tiny but incredibly painstaking forms of restoration, and guarded jealously for the treasures they were.

However, as Hildreth said, these were not our meat. Westmacott took us to the larger, general workshop. Here we saw really valuable, but ordinary, examples of olden furniture in the processes of repair and "faking."

"We pride ourselves," Westmacott told us, "on our ability to replace a faulty participle with a sound one, so meticulously reproduced and fitted — grafted on, one might say — that no one outside first-flight experts can detect the addition."

"That, of course, necessitates," smoothly came Hildreth's question, "your carrying an amazing stock of old cabinet-making woods, I presume?"

Westmacott looked curiously at my friend.

"*Aye*, amazing is the word," he laughed. "Come and have a look!"

He preceded us to a vast loft that was filled by racks and shelving — and all of them packed with broken parts of old-fashioned furniture.

"Here you are," he exulted, "from Tudor to Early Victorian; from linenfold paneling to pollard-oak sideboard doors . . . gathered together from the auction rooms of half the globe. We couldn't carry on a day without 'em. Unless similar old stuff is used on replacement jobs —"

"Stuff like this, for instance," Hildreth interrupted to point at a great stack of dirty wood, looking to me like huge half-cylinders of amber-flecked bog oak: split tree trunks. "This lot seems to be pretty ancient."

Ralph Westmacott moved delicately to Hildreth's side.

"*Aye*," he concurred, "it's old

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enough! That wood's been buried in the earth for a century and more."

Brightly, blandly, almost with the alert cockiness of a schoolboy, Barnabas Hildreth replied:

"I don't doubt that for a moment, Mr. Westmacott! They're elm-wood water conduits, aren't they? And judging from their boggish appearance, they've come out of country where there's plenty of peat about."

Ralph Westmacott scratched his grizzled hair.

"Yes, they *are* conduits, and they certainly came out of peaty loam — from Derbyshire, as a matter of fact. We've men on the job up there now. They came from Ravensham Park, near a place called Battersby Brow . . . we bought the whole line of wooden water-pipes that used to serve the hall and the village."

Grimly enough Hildreth chuckled.

"What a game it is!" he drily stated. "Now, 'Battersby Brow,' in Derbyshire" — he was jotting down these particulars in a notebook — "and 'Ravensham Park,' you say?"

"Yes, that's all correct." Westmacott seemed puzzled.

"And this hall you mentioned?"

"Ravensham Hall, the residence of General Sir Arthur Koffard."

Hildreth put away his book and began to fumble among the blackened elm-wood.

"Might I have a chunk to take away with me?" he inquired. "I want it for certain experiments that have to be made." Westmacott nodded. "And will you ratify this? Certain lumps of this wood that you knew would be useless for your work you gave to your brother Henry, didn't you?"

"I — I did! What's the —"

"That's right! I thought I recognized the stuff again. I saw some in his wood shed." Hildreth smiled. "*Thanks!*"

With that we went back to London.

From the "Black Bull," at Battersby Brow in Derbyshire, a letter came to me on October 29th:

"My dear Ingram,

If you can leave your mouldy rag to look after itself for the weekend, come over here and be interested. Of all the intricate bits of work I've ever struck, this is the trickiest! Don't let me down, old chap. I promise you a really noble *dénouement* for the mystery of the Westmacott bullet: an ending that, I suppose, you'll stick on one of your scandalous chronicles of my cases and complacently claim as your own.

Sincerely,

B. H."

So I set out for Battersby Brow and the "Black Bull" as soon as I put my paper to bed in the early hours of Friday, the thirty-first. At nine o'clock the next morning I was in a beautiful and brilliant country of whistling airs and mighty hills.

Over breakfast, Barnabas crowed mightily.

"Done a lot of work since I saw you, old man! Only one tiny coping-stone to be put on, and the job's complete.

"It *was* a Gannion dueling pistol that fired that ball. I've seen it. There's a pair of 'em, and they've

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been laid away in a case since 1710 . . . One was discharged. The other was loaded, but I got permission to draw the charge. I drew it right enough!" He chuckled. "D'you know, it was a curious experience. There I had in hand another ball, similar to the one that wounded Westmacott. And there were tiny, tattered fragments of a newspaper that had been used for a wad between bullet and powder — an issue of the *Northern Intelligencer* for August the first, 1710.

"The Koffards of Ravensham Hall have been awfully decent about everything. At first they were inclined to be stand-offish, but when I told old General Koffard the story you know, he tucked into things like a good 'un."

"Sorry to butt in, Barnabas — but, tell me, what story *do* I know? It occurs to me that I've only a few strikingly dissimilar and baffling incidents in mind, all hazily mixed up with lead that's 'worth its weight in gold' and old elm logs which you proved had come from this district."

Hildreth lit a cigarette.

"Listen, old man, and follow me carefully. . . . Go back in thought to the night of the twenty-third. You have Westmacott sitting in his chair. A bullet, apparently fired out of the void, strikes his shoulder and is deflected into the radio set. Point the first to be made: direction of bullet's flight proved it was shot from somewhere in the region of Westmacott's feet. Got that?" I surveyed the scene in mind. . . . I had to agree. "Now for point the second. Had a ball of that size possessed a high velocity, it'd have made the dickens of a mess of the *humerus*. It'd have caused a comminuted fracture and, without much doubt, it would have glanced across and gone through his throat.

"But no, it was a missile of low velocity — only a direct compound fracture of the *scapula* socket and a lazy glide off, to smack the front of the radio set.

"No one can say where the ball came from. The ineffable Egbert Coghill goes to photograph it. . . . He puts his plate-carrier dead in front of the set, incidentally in front of the bullet. For fully a quarter of an hour he footles about; then, when he comes to take his photographs, he carries on each plate he afterwards exposes a portrait of the ball, transmitted by its own power through the leather case, through the whole clutter of his mahogany slides and, in fact, through everything within eighteen inches of the radio cabinet!"

I jumped at that.

"D'you mean those Saturn-like globes were —"

"Photographs of that ball! *Precisely!* It emitted a short, hard ray of far more intensity than the usual X-ray apparatus employs!"

"But how could that come about?"

"*Pitchblende*," said Barnabas Hildreth, "that's why! Apart from certain areas in Cornwall, only the Peak district of Derbyshire and some isolated caverns round about Ingleborough in Yorkshire have pitchblende deposits. Usually, it's in asso-

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ciation with lead that has a high silver content. . . . The assay of that ball not only showed lead and silver, but definite traces of pitchblended striations, all melted together.

"To clinch that part of the business, however" — Hildreth glanced at the time — "remember that the second batch of Coghill's prints did *not* show the eerie little 'planet.' That was because he did not bung his plate-carrier in front of the radio set on his second venture. The active emissions were powerless outside a small range.

"But neither set of plates would betray anything except a fogginess where the bullet should have been. What could you reasonably expect?" Hildreth shrugged. "A long exposure, with powerful lens concentrating radium rays on a speedy photographic emulsion — nothing but fog *could* result!"

In the end I realized that Hildreth was right. Radio-active properties in that leaden slug would explain everything. Incidentally I caught the drift of what he meant when he spoke about the value of the bullet and its potentiality as the clue to a fortune.

"Do you mind" — Hildreth was on his feet and again looking at his watch — "if we hustle? We've a walk of a few miles if we're to get that coping-stone set, y'know. And I want it done today."

That long tramp across the sage-green acres of the Derbyshire countryside terminated in the park of Ravensham Hall. A group of navvies, excavating a snakish trench, paused in their work and watched us curiously. And from out of a nearby hut, a podgy and bespectacled man clad in a white coat, and an old iron-haired fellow with a face of claret, came to greet us. One was a chemist called Sowerby and the elder man was Major-General Sir Arthur Koffard.

"Well, Sowerby," Hildreth briskly questioned when introductions were completed, "had any luck?"

Sowerby smiled unctuously and beckoned us back to the hut. In there he pointed to a fire-clay retort that glowed above a fierce petrol-air lamp. Around the squat nozzle of the retort a big plume of intensely blue and brilliant flame was glowing.

"Yes, Mr. Hildreth, your surmise was right enough. It's *methyl hydride*, without a doubt." He pointed to the halcyon fire. "Almost pure, to burn like that."

"Most 'strordinary — most 'strordinary thing," this was the crisp clacking of Koffard, "'tha' one can live a lifetime, 'mong things like these, an' never know — never know. 'Course, this land's been full o' will-o-th'-wisp lights for years, but one never stops to give 'em much thought."

Barnabas abstractedly nodded and walked out. We followed him to the side of the trench. For a long while he studied the enormous hollow trunks that the navvies had dug out of the black and oozy earth.

"Magnificent trees," he muttered. "Veritable giants! Took some labor, I should say, to gouge their innards

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out!" Then he turned to Koffard and asked him something about a map.

"Aye, I've got it here." The rattle-voiced old officer produced a tin cylinder and drew out of it a scroll inscribed by rusted lines of ink. "The avenue stood across there. Nigel Koffard fought his duel" — he pointed to a level sward forty yards away — "just on that patch. At the beginning of the avenue, exactly."

When we went to this place we could plainly see a series of little hummocks stretching, in parallel, for almost half a mile. It was explained to me that here had been a hundred and more elms making a great avenue that was felled in 1803 — under each knoll was a mighty stump. The trunks, hollowed out, had gone into the formation of that pipe-line (for conveying drinking water from a hillside spring) the navvies were excavating.

Hildreth stopped exactly on the spot on which one Nigel Koffard had taken his stance to fight a duel on the morning of August the second, 1710.

"Now Sir Arthur," Hildreth murmured, "let's work things out. Your ancestor challenged his cousin to a duel, primarily over the intentions of that cousin toward your ancestor's sister. When the affair came to its head, Nigel Koffard was fully determined to put a ball through his cousin. But that doughty lad, conscious of honor and innocence, did not so much as lift his own pistol. Refused, point-blank, to defend himself."

"Tha's right; quite right!" Koffard applauded. "He must ha' had guts, y'know — simply stood there. Completely broke Nigel's nerve."

"And the said Nigel," Hildreth grinned, "thereupon did a bit of quick thinking. It dawned on him that he had misjudged his man. So, to show his regret and to extend an olive branch, he turned and fired his bullet straight into the nearest elm. Whereupon the youngsters shook hands. The cousin got permission to marry Nigel's fair sister, and the Gannion dueling pistols — one discharged and the other loaded — were put back in their case and guarded thereafter, for the sake of the episode, as family heirlooms."

"Precisely, sir!" said General Koffard. "Admirably put, sir!"

"Then, if that's so" — Hildreth was already on the move — "we'll trouble that invaluable plan of yours once again. Now we want to see this place called Skelter's Pot, where lead was mined in those days."

. . . We tramped a full mile up a mountainous slope and were eventually rewarded by the view of a bite into a pinkish face of spar, which the old map told us was "Skelter's Pot."

"Out of here," Sir Arthur Koffard told us, "came all the lead used hereabouts. The hall is roofed by it. That pistol-ball was certainly cast from it."

Hildreth took a geologist's hammer from his pocket and knocked away at a piece of semi-translucent quartz in which dull gray patches showed and on which strangely green filaments

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were netted.

"I would like," he softly returned as he put this specimen away, "to own your roof! At a modest estimate it'll be worth more than the hall and this estate put together."

"Now, you see, old chap" — Hildreth tapped the rough pencil sketch he had made — "this was the way of it." I leaned across the table, and under the steady oil-lamp light of the old Black Bull, I looked at the drawing. "Here we've all we need."

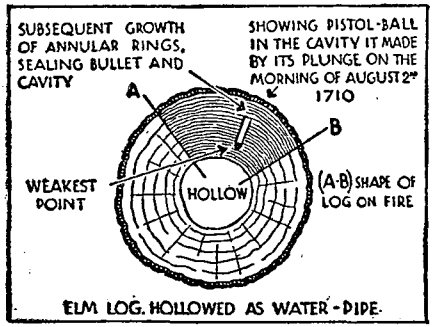
SUBSEQUENT GROWTH OF ANNULAR RINGS, SEALING BULLET AND CAVITY
SHOWING PISTOL-BALL IN THE CAVITY IT MADE BY ITS PLUNGE ON THE MORNING OF AUGUST 2ND 1710
A
B
WEAKEST POINT
HOLLOW
(A-B) SHAPE OF LOG ON FIRE
ELM LOG. HOLLOWED AS WATER-PIPE.

Diagram of the elm log burnt in the cashier's fire.

"When Nigel Koffard shot that ball, at closest range, into the living elm-tree it made a deep cavity, a tunnel, in which it stopped. In a few more years a 'rind-gall' was formed. The elm closed over the wound in its structure by a growth of annular rings. The cylindrical little tunnel remained and the ball remained.

"Then our elm showed signs of what is called 'doatiness' — incipient decay. It, together with all the others in the avenue, was felled, hollowed out, and used for an aqueduct. Y'see, old man, elm is the *one* wood which never changes if kept constantly wet.

"This is a queer countryside, Ingram. And the elm is a queer tree. Get those facts in mind.

"That chamber which held the bullet also held the gases of the elm's former disruption, and to these were added those similar gases which lurk in peaty land. 'Similar,' did I say? *Identical* would be a better word. . . . You heard old Koffard talk about marsh-gas; natural gas, that is. . . . Well, that's what we're considering. You saw that chemist fellow, Sowerby, with a retort full of elm-wood burning such gas at the mouth of the apparatus.

"*Methyl-hydride; methane; carbureted-hydrogen* — call it what you will, and still you're right — is marsh-gas. Also it's the dreaded and terribly explosive thing which miners call *fire-damp* . . . when mixed with air.

"You see it burning away in every fireside in the land. It's the illuminating property of coal. And it *always* results when bodies of a peaty, woody, or coaly constituent are subjected to great heat."

I began to have an inkling of what Hildreth was getting at.

"However, to the mechanics of the situation." He laughed and drank some beer. "Ralph Westmacott, the furniture man, buys some old weathered elm-wood from Derbyshire in order to fake his manufactures. What he has to spare — useless — he gives, as usual, to his brother, Henry Leon-

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ard. Our good Henry Leonard diligently saws it up into chunks and fills the family woodshed.

"Now comes a rainy and dismal October night. Henry puts a log on the open-hearth fire, extends his slippered feet, and prepares to enjoy the evening.

"But the wild mystery of the ever-burgeoning earth comes into the simple household of The Nook and claims him. . . . He hears a violent hiss. That was air rushing into the vascular tissue of that hot elm-log, combining with the incredible chemistry of Nature with the terrible potential of that hydrocarbon, *methane, in the hollow where the bullet lay concealed.*

"Nigel Koffard's powder had not half the fulminating property, in the steel barrel of his pistol, that *fire-damp* had in the smooth wound of the elm log. . . . Pressure increased, since the hollow was filling every second with more and more gas, and air was in combination with it. At last, the hungry fire, eating away the inner face of the log, reached the terribly explosive mixture. Then *bang*, up and outwards shot the ball into Henry's shoulder.

"So we're back at our beginning — the very first point I made: that the ball was fired from somewhere about Westmacott's feet. I recalled flying fragments of coal and co-related things . . . allowing, always, for the unusual.

"But, instead of coal and cinders, the well of the grate was filled with half-burned fragments of wood — like fragments of furniture, surmounted by a big tricorne hunk of charred elm-wood. I wondered, vastly, about those fragments. Then, when I saw the little boy, Brian, playing with his home-made building blocks, I was definitely set on the second line which led me to solution."

He picked up his tankard and smiled.

"That green network you saw on the surface of that spar *was* pitch-blende! I'm told it's more than usually rich in radium and uranium salts.

"The land on which Skelter's Pot is situated belongs to the Commissioners. It's an open common land. Anyone procuring the necessary faculty, and entering into serious negotiations, can mine it. . . . So, with the joyous approval of Mr. Henry Leonard Westmacott, I have entered my innocent ally Master Brian's name on our list —"

" 'Our list'?" I was puzzled by his most deliberate pause. "What list?"

"Oh, the little company I'm forming: myself, yourself, Koffard, Westmacott and young Brian, to exploit the pitchblende deposits of our property in Skelter's Pot, Derbyshire." He laughed and stretched his long arms. "It ought to provide for us in our old age, if nothing else!"

. . . Judging by my latest returns from that adroitly-contrived concern, I am inclined, stoutly, to agree.

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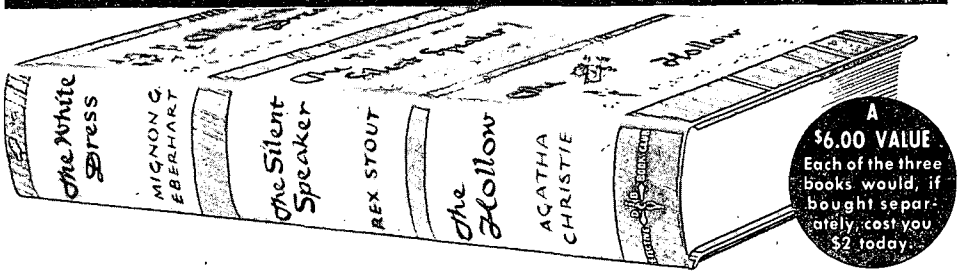

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